MOTH

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DANIEL ARENSON

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FOREWORD

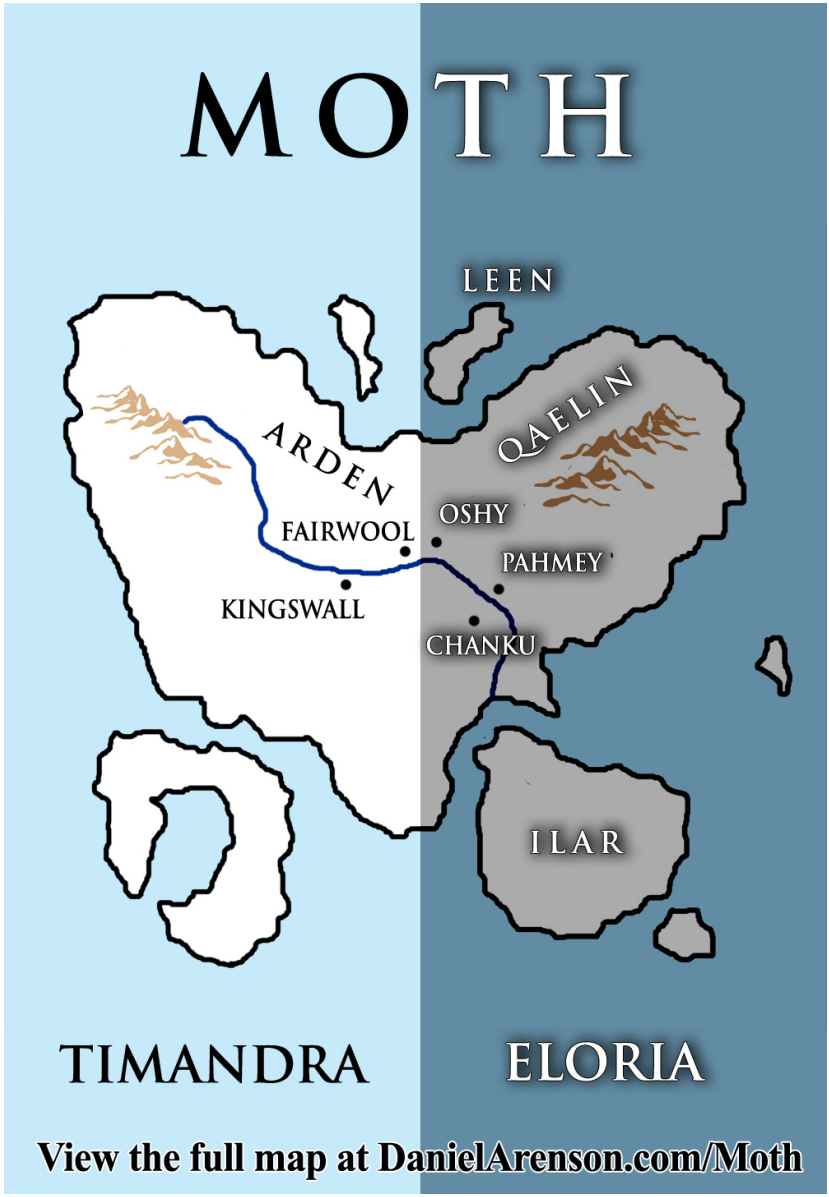
Welcome to Moth, a world torn in two—its one half always in sunlight, the other always dark.

Between chapters, you might like to visit the Moth website, where you can find:

* A large map of Moth (more detailed than the simple map in this ebook)
* An original Moth soundtrack
* Moth artwork
* A Moth wiki detailing the world's kingdoms, faiths, and more

Visit the website at: DanielArenson.com/Moth

And now . . . let us enter a world of light and darkness . . .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CHAPTER ONE
A DISCOVERY IN DUSK

They entered the shadows, seeking a missing child.

Torin swallowed, clutched the hilt of his sword, and gazed around with darting eyes. The trees still grew densely here—mossy oaks with trunks like melting candles, pines heavy with needles and cones, and birches with peeling white bark. Yet this was not the forest Torin had always known. The light was wrong, a strange ocher that bronzed the trees and kindled floating pollen. The shadows were too long, and the sun hung low in the sky, hiding behind branches like a shy maiden peering between her window shutters. Torin had never seen the sun shine from anywhere but overhead, and this place sent cold sweat trickling down his back.

"This is wrong," he said. "Why would she come this far?"

Bailey walked at his side, holding her bow, her quiver of arrows slung across her back. Her two braids, normally a bright gold, seemed eerily metallic in this place. The dusk glimmered against her breastplate—not the shine they knew from home, but a glow like candles in a dungeon.

"I don't know," she said. "Yana has been strange since her parents died in the plague. Maybe she thought it would be an adventure."

Despite himself, Torin shivered. "An adventure? In the dusk? In this cursed place no sensible person should ever enter?"

Bailey raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Why not? Aren't you feeling adventurous now?"

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "Adventure means sneaking out to Old Garin's farm to steal beets, mixing rye with

ale, or climbing the old maple tree in the village square." He looked around at the shadowy forest, and his hand felt clammy around his hilt. "Not this place. Not the dusk."

They kept walking, heading farther east, deeper into the shadows. Torin knew what the elders said. Thousands of years ago, the world used to turn. The sun rose and fell, and night followed day in an endless dance. Men woke at dawn, worked until the sunset, and slept through the darkness.

Torin shivered. He didn't know if he believed those stories. In any case, those days were long gone. The dance had ended. The world had fallen still. Torin was a child of eternal sunlight, of a day that never ended. Yet now . . . now they were wandering the borderlands, the dusky strip—a league wide—that was neither day nor night, claimed by neither his people nor the others . . . those who dwelled in the dark.

A shadow darted ahead.

Torin leaped and drew his sword.

A rabbit raced across the forest and disappeared into a burrow.

Bailey stared at his drawn sword, eyes wide, then burst into laughter.

"Protect me, brave Sir Torin Greenmoat!" she said, doubling over. "Will you defend me from the evil Bunny of the Night?"

Torin grumbled and sheathed his blade, cursing himself. He had come of age last autumn, turning eighteen, and he had joined the Village Guard, yet it seemed Bailey would forever mock him.

"Hush," he said. "It could have been them."

She rolled her eyes. "*They* don't walk this far dayside, *if* they even exist."

"How do you know?"

Bailey groaned. "Everybody knows that. It's still too bright here. The nightfolk only live in the deep darkness." She lowered

her voice. "It's dark as the deepest cave there, Torin. It's darker than the soul of a killer, darker than toast burnt in dragonfire, darker than the empty spaces inside your skull. So dark you can't see your own feet. That's where they lurk . . . scuttling, whispering, sharpening their claws . . ." She inched closer to him and smiled wickedly, the orange light reflecting in her eyes. "When all light is gone, that is where they'll . . . *leap* at you."

She lunged toward him, clawing the air. Torin muttered and pushed her back.

"This is no time for your games," he said. "A child is missing. Until we find Yana, I'm keeping my hand on my sword. And you should nock an arrow."

She blew out her breath noisily, fluttering her lips. "Yana is thirteen, rebellious, and wants attention. We'll find her long before we hit the true darkness. Let's keep walking, and do try not to wet yourself." She winked. "I promise you, no bunnies will hurt you, Babyface."

He sighed. She knew he hated that name. Even at eighteen, Torin still stood a little shorter than Bailey, and people often said he looked young for his age, his eyes too large, his cheeks too soft, and his chest too smooth. Torin had hoped that joining the Village Guard would make Bailey see him as a man, not a callow boy, but so far his hopes had been dashed. Standing almost six feet tall, preferring leggings and boots to gowns and slippers, Bailey wasn't easy to impress. Jumping at rabbits wasn't helping either.

They walked on. Torin didn't wet himself, but with every step, his heart raced faster and more sweat trickled. As they headed farther east, the sun sank lower behind them. The shadows deepened, stretching across the forest floor like slender men in black robes.

The forest began to thin out. Back in Timandra, in the full light of day, the trees grew thick and lush and rich with birds.

Here in the dusk, they faded like receding hair on an aging man's scalp. The verdant woods dwindled into a few scattered trees, stunted and bent, their leaves gray. The soil lost its rich brown hue, darkening into charcoal thick with black stones. Another mile and the sun actually touched the horizon behind them, casting red beams between the last trees. The air grew colder and Torin hugged himself.

"We should go back," he said, hating that his voice sounded so choked. "We've come too far. We're almost at the night."

A lump filled his throat like a boiled egg, too large to swallow. Torin had seen the night before. Like everyone in the Village Guard, he had climbed the Watchtower upon the hill. He had gazed across the dusk, this withered no man's land, and beheld the great shadow in the east. But that had been different. In the safety of the Watchtower, the daylight upon him and the forest rustling below, it was easy to be brave. Now he walked toward the very lair of the beasts.

"*Scared*?" Bailey asked, smiling crookedly.

Torin nodded. "Yes and you should be too. They live near here." He took a shuddering breath. "The people of the night. *Elorians*." The word tasted like ash.

Bailey snickered and kept walking, her braids swinging. "If you ask me, 'lorians are just a myth." She trudged up a hillside strewn with boulders. "People who live in eternal night, their eyes large as an owl's, their skin milk white, their souls pitch-black?" She snorted. "It's just a myth to keep children away from the darkness."

Torin followed reluctantly, though every beat of his heart screamed to turn around, to head back west, to return to the eternal daylight of his home. Bailey could snicker at the stories, but Torin wasn't so dismissive. If the world indeed used to turn, and day and night would cycle like summer and winter, would people not have lived here once? When the world had frozen,

leaving Timandra in light and Eloria in darkness, would the people here not wither into twisted demons, hateful of the light, thirsty for the blood of honest folk?

"Torin!" Bailey looked over her shoulder at him. The low sun painted her a bloody red. "Are you following, or will you run back to safety while I go looking?"

He grumbled and trudged uphill after her. "If I turn back now, I'd never hear the end of it."

She grinned and winked. "That's the spirit, Winky."

He sighed. It was another name he hated. Years ago, while wrestling with Bailey, he had fallen upon a stone and scratched his left eye. Since then his pupil had remained fully dilated, hiding most of the iris. He could see only smudges from that eye now, a blurred world like a melted painting. Folks joked that his eyes were like the world's halves, one green and good, the other black and dead. To Bailey, he had simply become *Winky*.

Since his parents had died in the plague ten years ago—a pestilence many claimed the Elorians had spread—Torin had been living with Bailey and her grandfather. The young woman, a year his senior, could always draw him into trouble. Whenever Bailey climbed the Old Maple, she would challenge him to climb too, then laugh as he dangled and fell. Whenever she ran across the fields, she'd challenge him to a race, then tease him relentlessly for losing. Torin had always been a little slower, a little clumsier, a little meeker, and even here and now—old enough to serve in the Village Guard, tracking a missing child through the shadows—she could goad him.

He shook his head as he walked uphill. Sometimes he loved Bailey like a true sister. Sometimes he thought her beautiful, brave, and his best friend. And sometimes, like now, he thought her the most stubborn, reckless soul this side of darkness.

Several feet ahead of him, she reached the hilltop, froze, and gasped.

Torin's heart raced. He clutched his hilt and drew a foot of steel. For an instant, he was sure the Elorians were swarming toward her. He raced uphill, boots scattering pebbles, and came to stand beside her.

His hand loosened around his hilt, letting his sword slide back into its scabbard.

Bailey turned toward him, her eyes damp, and smiled tremulously. "It's beautiful, Torin. It's so beautiful."

He looked ahead, saw the land of Eloria, and could barely breathe.

Beautiful? he thought. It looked about as beautiful as the black heart of a viper.

From the Watchtower back home, the night seemed a mere smudge of ink, a blackness that spread into the horizon. But standing here upon the edge of dusk, he beheld a new world. Lifeless black hills rolled into the distance. Beyond them, mountains rose against a deep indigo sky. Wind moaned, scattering dust and invading Torin's clothes with icy fingers. No plants grew here; he saw no grass, no trees, no life at all.

Upon one hill, several miles away, rose the black obelisk men called the Nighttower, a twin to the Watchtower back home. Torin had seen it before from the safety of daylight, a needle in the distance. Seeing the edifice so close chilled him, a strange feeling like seeing one's profile between two mirrors, a vision familiar yet uncomfortably different. The Nighttower rose like a stalagmite from the hilltop, black and craggy. Some men claimed it was a natural structure, carved by wind and rain; others claimed the Elorians had built their own tower to observe Timandra. Even standing here, Torin could not decide, but he had no desire to get any closer.

Above all else, even more than the barren stone and looming tower, it was the sky that spun Torin's head. Countless small, glowing dots covered the firmaments like holes punched

through a black blanket. An orb floated among them, as large as the sun back home, glowing silver. It took Torin a moment to realize—it was the moon. He had seen the moon before from the dayside, a wisp like a mote of dust, but here it shone like a great lantern.

"The stars and the moon," Bailey whispered. "I've heard of them. The lights of the night."

He grabbed her arm. "Bailey, this is enough. We've crossed the dusk; this is Eloria itself ahead. This land is forbidden." He tried to tug her back downhill. "We go home. Now."

She refused to budge. "Wait. Look, Winky. Down there."

He followed her gaze, staring toward the distant land of darkness. A lump lay below upon the eastern hillside.

"A boulder," he said.

Bailey shook her head, braids swaying. "All the other boulders here are tall and jagged. This one's smooth."

She pulled her arm free and walked downhill, heading deeper into the darkness. Torin cursed and looked behind him. Back in the west, the sun still shone and trees still grew; they were gray and twisted nearby, green and lush farther back. Far above them, he could see the top of the Watchtower and the blue sky of Timandra behind it.

Home. Safety.

He turned away, muttering curses, and began walking downhill after Bailey.

"She always does this to me," he grumbled.

Thanks to her taunts, he had fallen from trees, almost drowned swimming after her in the river, and nearly gagged during a pie-eating contest. And now this—walking into the land of darkness itself.

He drew his sword and held the blade before him. He had never swung it in battle; he wondered if that would change now. As he moved nightward, his boots scattering pebbles, he kept

glancing around, seeking them. He had seen countless statues, paintings, and effigies of Elorians, and now those visions returned to him, mocking him with oversized eyes, sharp teeth, and claws. He sucked in his breath and held it.

Bailey knelt ahead over the lump. She looked up at him, and the last beams of sunlight filled her eyes. They gleamed, two orange lanterns.

"Torin," she whispered, voice choked.

He crossed the last few steps toward her. He knelt at her side, looked at the shadow below, and lowered his head.

We found her.

Yana lay on her back, eyes glassy and staring. Her skin was pale gray, and her hands were still balled into fists. Three gashes gaped open across her chest, and blood soaked her tunic, deep crimson in the night. A steel star, its points serrated, pierced her neck.

Bailey's hand shook as she closed the girl's eyes.

"I think we should leave now," she whispered.

Torin nodded and they lifted the girl. All the way here, they had taunted each other, laughing and groaning. They walked home in silence, leaving the darkness and returning to a day that seemed less bright.

CHAPTER TWO
THE WATCHTOWER'S SHADOW

Torin stood upon a green hill under blue sky, the villagers shouting around him.

"We will slay them all!" one man cried, waving a bread knife.

"It's time to kill the savages!" shouted another man, clutching a sickle.

Torin raised his hands and called out, his voice ringing over them. "My friends, calm yourselves. Please!"

Yet they kept bustling and shouting, and Torin sighed.

Five hundred people lived in Fairwool-by-Night, this peaceful village on the border of Eloria. It seemed every one of them now crowded the grassy Watcher's Hill.

The sun shone overhead, the air was warm, and birds sang, and yet a chill clung to Torin. He was back in Timandra, the sunlit half of the world, but his knees still shook and ice still filled his belly. Whenever he blinked, he saw it again—the dusky borderlands withering and fading into the blackness that lay beyond, the barren realms of night. Yana lay in the village temple now, wrapped in a shroud and awaiting her burial, but Torin could still see her glassy eyes, her bloodstained tunic, and the metal shard embedded into her neck.

He shuddered, took a deep breath, and looked down the western hillside upon the good half of the world. The village of Fairwool-by-Night, his home, nestled in a grassy valley. Thirty-odd cottages, their clay walls supporting thatched roofs, surrounded a pebbly square. A brick temple rose above the

homes, a stronghold of the new Sailith Order that had recently spread from the capital. The gurgling Sern River flowed south of the village, its banks lined with rushes and wildflowers, its water mottled with sunlight. Several boats swayed, tethered to the docks, awaiting loads of wool for the capital. West of the village spread farmlands, barns, and pastures. A distant flock of sheep grazed like clouds in a green sky.

Home, Torin thought. *A place of peace and greenery on the edge of darkness.*

A small rye field rustled south of the hill, and a forest spread to the north. When Torin turned eastward, he saw the trees slide toward the dusk, the shadowy strip that still made him shiver. Beyond loomed the darkness, a stain across the sky. He could see the top of the Nighttower rising from the shadows, a lone sentinel, and wondered if any Elorians now stood upon that obelisk, watching Fairwool-by-Night. In all of Timandra, the blessed lands of sunlight, no other settlement lay so close to Eloria, the land of darkness.

We live on the very border of evil, Torin thought, *a sheep grazing just outside the wolf's den.*

Finally he looked behind him at the Watchtower, a stone steeple that rose from the hilltop. It dwarfed every other building in the village, even the temple, and battlements crowned its top. Torin had climbed the tower many times since joining the Village Guard last autumn. From its crest he could see for miles, past the dusk and into the night itself. For hundreds of years, the Watchtower had guarded the border of night. For hundreds of years, its guard had been peaceful.

And now a child lies dead, Torin thought. *And now this peace is shattered.*

He returned his eyes to the crowd of villagers. Farmers, shepherds, and tradesmen, they wore woolen tunics and leather shoes, and they clutched what weapons they had—sickles,

hammers, and knives. Their faces were pale. Their eyes darted. Some shouted for vengeance, others for calm. One woman wailed that Fairwool-by-Night was too close to the border, and that the entire village should be uprooted and moved upriver.

"Everyone, calm down and listen!" Torin said, but the villagers ignored him.

He turned toward Lord Kerof, the mayor of Fairwool-by-Night, who sat by his side in a wicker chair. Torin placed his hand upon the old man's shoulder.

"Grandpapa, they need you to speak," Torin said softly. "They're frightened. They need to hear that everything will be all right."

The old man looked up at him, blinking rheumy eyes. The breeze ruffled his thinning white hair. He licked his lips and tried to speak but only coughed.

Torin lowered his head, remembering how strong the man used to be. Ten years ago, after the plague had torn through Fairwool-by-Night, Kerof had adopted two children to live in his manor. One was Bailey, his granddaughter, her parents fallen to the illness. The other was Torin, the quiet son of a soldier. Lord Kerof had been a tall, bluff man in those days, his shoulders broad, his hair thick and grizzled. The loss of his sons, the passing years, and the infiltration of the Sailith Order had done their work. Now Kerof could only walk with a cane, speak with a rasp, and see little but smudges.

"Grandpapa," Torin said again. He always called him that, despite not sharing his blood. "Will you speak to them?"

As the villagers bustled and cried out, Lord Kerof clutched the arms of his wicker chair. His fists trembled as he pushed himself to his feet. Torin helped him stand, holding his arm. Kerof cleared his throat, then spoke in a scratchy voice.

"Fellow Fairwoolians!" he said and raised a shaky hand. "Hear me."

The villagers finally fell silent. If they ignored young Torin, a humble gardener, they would still listen to their mayor, old and feeble as he was. Kerof cleared his throat and continued.

"You have nothing to fear, my people," said the elderly lord. "You're safe here in the sunlit lands. Our courageous Village Guard protects you."

Faces in the crowd soothed, and men lowered their sickles and clubs. Torin looked around at his fellow guards. Bailey stood up in the Watchtower now, her bow and arrow aimed at the night beyond. The remainder of the Village Guard stood by a mulberry tree here below—young Camlin, wiry and shrewd, and Hemstad, large and lumbering and licking mulberry juice off his fingers. The two friends were seventeen—a year younger than Torin—and inseparable.

He sighed. The Village Guard was only the four of them; not one had yet turned twenty. Torin was gardener, Cam was a shepherd, and Hem was a baker. As for Bailey, the mayor's granddaughter, Torin wasn't sure she even had a trade. Every few hours, one of them donned a breastplate, grabbed a sword and a bow, and climbed the Watchtower to gaze into the night. The rest of the time, Torin tended to his gardens, Cam herded his sheep, Hem baked his breads, and Bailey explored the countryside to return with scraped knees, bee stings, and stories of adventure.

We're not much of a military force, Torin thought, sighing as he watched Hem bite his tongue and wail. *But if we can calm the villagers, we've done our job.*

"We've increased our patrols," Torin spoke up, drawing confidence from Kerof standing at his side. "At any given moment one of us is up in the tower, watching the night. We're always here to protect the village. So long as we stay out of the dusk, we're safe. I promise you."

His words seemed to have the desired effect. Women lowered rolling pins and pans. Men grumbled and lowered clubs

and pitchforks. One by one, the villagers began to disperse, heading downhill and back toward the village.

Torin breathed a sigh of relief . . . then froze when he saw the robed figure trudging uphill.

His relieved sigh turned into a groan.

"Ferius," he muttered and clenched his fists.

The short, broad-shouldered man wore the yellow robes of the Sailith Order. Three of his monks walked behind him, their faces hidden under their hoods. Ferius raised his fist and cried out to the crowd.

"Turn away soothing words that seek to blind you!" His voice hissed like a viper. "Only the Sailith Faith speaks truth. And the truth is that danger lurks. You are all in grave peril, friends of mine."

The people paled and mumbled fearful prayers. Once more, the villagers raised their makeshift weapons. Torin muttered under his breath.

He hated Ferius. He hated him more than all the weeds, bee stings, and leaf-rot in the world. The monk, as he called himself, had arrived in Fairwool-by-Night three years ago to build his temple and spread his faith.

These monks called Sailith the one true religion, but Torin didn't see how it was a religion at all. He and his friends, like most decent folk, followed the old faith of Idarism; they worshiped Idar, the god of sunlight, and the green things that he grew. If this new Sailith Order had a god, its adherents never spoke of him. They preached only one message: hatred of Eloria.

"Ferius, return to your temple," Torin said, not bothering to mask the disgust in his voice. "Do not spread your fear here. I told the villagers we were safe. I do not lie."

The monk reached him and hissed, tongue darting between small, sharp teeth. Torin was not a tall man, and Ferius stood even shorter, though his strong frame bulged against his yellow robes.

The monk's skin also bore a yellow tinge. His eyes were beady, far-set, and pale blue. His eyebrows were so sparse Torin could barely see them. The monk was only in his thirties, but already his black hair was thinning; he wore it slicked back from his broad, protruding brow.

"Oh, but you do lie," Ferius said in that slithering voice. He leaned closer, squinted, and scrutinized Torin like an undertaker examining a body. "All you speak is falsehood, Torin the *Gardener*." He spat out that last word as an insult, then turned toward the crowd and raised his voice. "My people, reject those who would pull the wool over your eyes. The heathen speaks of safety, and yet a child lies dead. The heathen is nothing but a coward. His cowardice would bring the enemy to the very edge of the dusk—to your very doorsteps. His lies mean more dead children."

Some villagers muttered agreements, and one farmer waved a sickle and shouted for blood. Mothers clutched their children to their breasts. Yana had been a plague orphan like Torin—she had no relatives to mourn her, yet in a village of only five hundred souls, every orphan was loved. More iron tools rose, and shouts rang across the hill.

Old Mayor Kerof, white hair billowing, blustered and raised his hands and urged calm, but his cough silenced his words. Torin helped the kindly elder back into his wicker seat, turned back toward the crowd, and shouted.

"So what will you do? March into Nightside? Fight a war with farm tools and bread knives?" Torin shook his head. "My friends, return to your fields, workshops, and pastures. Let us in the Village Guard do our job. We will defend you."

Ferius snorted a laugh. "Hear the heathen speak his deception! He claims to protect you? Did he protect our dearest Yana, a beautiful child snatched too soon?" His beady eyes blazed. "The demons slew her. The dwellers of the dark." Ferius's lips

peeled back, baring his teeth. "The creatures slew a being of the light. Only Sailith can defend us blessed, sunlit children from the beasts of darkness. Only Sailith can defeat the Elorians."

Those words swept through the crowd like wildfire. Men shouted and brandished their weapons. Children wailed and one woman fainted.

"We must kill one of their own!" shouted a farmer.

"We must fight back!" cried a woman, face red, and raised a cleaver.

"We *will* fight back." Ferius raised his arms. "My friends, the Sailith Order does not merely claim to defend you while letting children die. Sailith fights against evil."

Torin began to object, but it seemed nobody heard him. Voices rang out. Fear boiled into anger. Smiling thinly, Ferius reached into his robes and pulled out an effigy of wicker and wood. He held the doll over his head. It was shaped as an Elorian—its eyes oversized, its hair white, its wooden claws painted red.

"Sailith does not cower!" Ferius shouted. "Sailith will slay the beasts."

He snapped his fingers. As if by magic, a spark flew toward the effigy. The small, wicker Elorian burst into flames. The villagers cheered, raised their fists, and waved their weapons. Ferius tossed down the effigy and stamped it with his boot.

"Death to Elorians!" the monk shouted, and the people answered his call.

"Death to Elorians! Death to Elorians!"

Torin raised his hands and shouted above them. "My friends, please. Calm yourselves. Do not spread more violence."

Those words only seemed to whip Ferius into a deeper frenzy. He paced across the hilltop, robes swaying and eyes wild.

"See how the heathen loves the nightfolk," the monk cried. "See how he wishes to protect them. See his darkened left eye, an

eye blind to the sunlight; does his evil eye gaze eternally into the night?"

The people grumbled, pointed at Torin, and muttered of treachery. Torin fumed. He held no love for Elorians. He had seen Yana's body cut and butchered. He had walked to the very cusp of darkness and gazed upon its unholy plains. His parents had died in the plague—an illness the people claimed Eloria had spread. And now he was accused of loving the enemy?

"I only want to stop more bloodshed—" he began, but Ferius was already walking downhill, calling for the people to follow.

"My monks bear lanterns, my friends," he said. "We will bring light to the darkness. We will march into the dusk, and we will find the demon that slew our child. We will have vengeance!"

The mob roared. "Vengeance! Vengeance!"

Robes swaying, Ferius led the people downhill toward the shadowy, eastern forests—the realms of dusk where the sun faded into the eternal night. His three followers, hooded and silent monks, walked at his sides. They produced oil lanterns from their packs, lit flames within, and held the lights high. Lanterns had no use in Fairwool-by-Night, a village drenched in eternal sunlight, yet all followers of Sailith carried them, symbols of their faith.

"We will light the darkness!" Ferius shouted, raising his own lantern. "We will instill fear in the demons' hearts."

Torin grumbled and fear filled his own heart. He had loved the girl Yana, yet she had wandered into the shadows. She had placed herself in danger. And now Ferius would lead fifty people into the same danger. How many would the Elorians slaughter—like they had slaughtered Yana?

Reluctantly, he began to follow the mob downhill. He could perhaps not sway them away from the darkness, but he was still a Village Guardian, and he would do his best to protect them. He passed by his fellow guards and gestured for them to follow.

"Come on," he said. "We're going with them."

Short, scrawny Cam raised an eyebrow. Tall, portly Hem swallowed a handful of mulberries and wiped his hands on his pants.

"Are you quite mad?" the rotund youth said, lips stained blue. "It's dangerous out there."

Half the baker's size, Cam nodded. "Hem only fears two things: an empty pantry and a land with no fruit trees. I only fear one thing: a hungry Hem. I ain't going nightward either."

Torin growled and grabbed both boys. He began tugging them downhill after the mob, ignoring their objections.

"We're Village Guardians," he said. "Our job is to protect the villagers, even if they're naive enough to march right into danger. Now put down those mulberries, draw your swords, and follow."

Ahead, Ferius was already nearing the shadows, lamp held before him. The people followed in a mass, brandishing their cleavers, sickles, and clubs. As Torin trailed behind, he sighed. These villagers were no warriors, but neither were he and his friends—they were a gardener, a shepherd, and a baker who sometimes grabbed a bow and climbed a tower.

Yet now we march into the darkness, he thought. He clutched his sword and shivered.

He looked back up at the Watchtower. He could see Bailey upon the battlements, an arrow nocked in her bow. She looked down toward him, hundreds of feet away. It was too far to see clearly, but Torin thought she looked pale, her eyes wide with fear.

"We will light the darkness!" Ferius shouted ahead. "Death to Elorians! Sailith will cast the light."

The villagers left the sunlit hillside. They entered the shadowy, twisting forest where Torin had walked with Bailey only hours ago. As they moved deeper into the shadows, Torin

remembered Yana's dead eyes and dried blood. His heart thudded, and even with fifty people around him, cold sweat trickled down his back.

CHAPTER THREE
A DUEL IN THE DARK

They walked along the riverbanks, fifty villagers shouting for blood. For the first mile, alders and rushes grew along the water, swaying in the breeze. Caterpillars crawled on leaves, grasshoppers bustled, and chickadees and robins sang upon the branches. Farther along the river, the sun began to sink behind them, casting dapples across the water. After a mile or two, the light was dim. The trees grew stunted here, and the rushes hung wilted and pale. No more birds flew. Shadows stretched ahead.

"Raise your lanterns, brothers and sisters!" Ferius cried, leading the procession. He and his monks raised their lights, casting a golden glow. "Follow and fear no darkness."

Torin followed the mob, but he did fear this darkness. He had seen the evil that lurked ahead. He had seen the dead, had seen a lifeless land and a sky strewn with stars.

"The bloody fools," he muttered. "Why do they listen to Ferius?"

Hemstad Baker trundled at his side. He was the tallest man in Fairwool-by-Night, but also the widest, and he struggled to keep up. The pots and pans he always carried, even on short journeys, clanked across his back. With every step, his sword swung between his legs like a tail. His ample belly swung almost as wildly, sweat soaked his face, and his breath wheezed.

"Did you see one, Tor?" he asked. "An . . . an Elorian?"

Cam walked at their side, a smirk on his face. The rushes, tall enough to brush the others' shoulders, nearly rose above his head. The diminutive shepherd had sharp features, dark hair, and

intelligent eyes. Rarely seen far from Hem, young Cam was also never slow to scold his friend.

"Of course he didn't see one, Hem," the shepherd said. "They don't really exist—sort of like leftovers on your plate. Ferius, that sheep's dropping, just made them up to frighten us."

Hem bit his wobbling lip and trudged on, pots clattering like a suit of armor. "Why would he want to do that?" He gulped. "I don't like being frightened."

"Hem, your mind is woolly as fleece," said Cam. "A frightened man is a follower. That's all Ferius and his monks want—people to follow them." He swept his arm across the twilit landscape. "And it's working. Look. Fifty villagers follow him the way my sheep follow me across the field."

Hem stepped on a rock, wobbled, and steadied himself with a ruckus of banging iron. "Well, I'm only following because Tor insisted we do." He stared at Torin. "Why *are* we following again?"

As he walked along the darkening riverbanks, the grass and rushes fading down to a rocky path, Torin asked himself the same question. If the people wanted to follow Ferius, perhaps he should let them. Why was it his concern? If they all wanted to march into darkness and die, why should he stop them?

He looked ahead at the group—four monks and fifty raging villagers. He sighed.

"Twenty years ago, my father came home from the war with Verilon. You've heard stories of that war, haven't you?" When his friends nodded, Torin continued. "He lived in the capital at first. He was a broken man then, scarred, haunted, one of his legs gone to a Verilish blade. Many doubted he would live much longer; he drank to drown his demons. When he moved to Fairwool-by-Night, he found new life. He met my mother in our village; they were happy here. My parents died in Fairwool, but they died together—peacefully." Torin looked behind him at the dwindling light of his home. "I owe this village a debt. I'll do my best to

protect its people. Even if I have to follow them into the very darkness of Eloria."

Hem mewled. "Please don't say that name. Just . . . just call it Nightside like honest folk do. Not . . . not its *real* name." He shuddered. "They say its real name is cursed."

Torin was about to reply when movement caught his eye. He looked up to see a speck flutter near his head. He started, sure it was a steel throwing star, a weapon like the one he'd found buried in Yana's neck. A heartbeat later, a grin spread across Torin's face. He reached out and closed his hand around his quarry.

Hem mewled and stepped back, but Cam leaned forward, squinting.

"What is it?" the shepherd asked.

Torin loosened his grip to reveal a moth, one of its wings white, the other black. He kept it trapped between his fingers. The moth seemed to regard him, moving its feathery antennae.

"It's a duskmoth. They only live here in the dusk. See its wings?" Torin smiled. "I never knew they were real. I thought they were only a legendary creature, meant to symbolize our world. Look, it's even shaped like Mythimna. Its left wing is white like Timandra. Its right wing is black like Eloria." He opened his fingers, letting it fly away.

Torin had seen maps of the world. The shape of its landforms reminded him of a moth, two great wings of earth stretching out into the sea, one drenched in eternal light, the other dark in endless night. The old books called the world *Mythimna*, an ancient name. Now most folk simply called it Moth, the proper title all but forgotten.

He watched the released moth flutter into the distance. With his mismatched eyes, Torin felt linked to this animal with mismatched wings. Perhaps the entire world was like that small,

insignificant creature, torn in two, floating through some vast sky, one wing light and one dark.

"It's pretty," Hem said, watching the moth flutter away.

Cam rolled his eyes. "Merciful Idar, you're a man of the Village Guard, and you're about as big as an ox. You shouldn't think butterflies are pretty."

The lumbering baker thrust out his bottom lip. "It's a *moth*, not a butterfly. And you're about as small as a moth yourself, so be quiet."

Torin stood watching until the moth disappeared into the distance, then tightened his lips. The villagers had gone farther east along the river, and he rushed to catch up. Cam and Hem hurried at his side, their swords clanking and their boots thumping.

Soon the last grass and bushes faded. The sun touched the horizon behind them, an orange disk, casting long shadows. Another mile and the sun would disappear, and they would reach Eloria itself. Torin had seen that land from the hilltop, and the memory still haunted him. He had no wish to actually set foot in the night. He raced ahead, whipping around the villagers, and approached Ferius.

The monk led the procession, lamp held high. The light gleamed against his waxy skin. His tongue licked his teeth. He reminded Torin of some diseased snake slithering toward a mouse.

"Ferius, you've taken them far enough," he said. "Stop this madness. Another mile and we'll emerge from the dusk into Nightside itself."

The monk turned toward him, and his lips twisted into a grin. He hissed between his teeth.

"Do you fear the darkness, little child?"

"I do. And so should you." Torin swallowed. "You didn't see Yana's body. You didn't see her wounds. Ferius, if you take us

any deeper into this darkness, you'll be accountable for any other deaths."

Ferius's grin widened. "Oh, innocent child of daylight. What do you know of death? I will not shy away from the dark. I will not live an ideal, oblivious life in the sunlight, not when evil lurks so near to home." He brandished his lamp. "The followers of Sailith are brave, and we do not fear the shadow. We march to banish it. To bring light." He raised his voice. "We will burn the enemy with the fires of the sun!"

Torin shook his head. "You're mad."

Ferius didn't seem to hear him. The monk marched on and the mob followed. Torin tried to speak to them. He tried to turn them back. Yet their souls were swayed; he could not stop them. Orange light still glowed in the west, but in the east, the sky turned a deep indigo like a bruise. The Nighttower rose upon the distant hill, a shard like a stalagmite. The moon emerged above the steeple, casting a silvery ring. Seeing this god of night, the people gasped and pointed, but they did not slow.

"Do not fear the shadows!" Ferius said. "Our lamps burn bright, and we will find those who hurt us. We will burn them."

They kept moving. Torin was wondering if he should grab Ferius and pull him back, despite the man's bulky frame, when he saw the figure ahead.

He froze and stared.

A lone fisherman stood in the night, his rod held over the river. The moon rose behind him, silhouetting a slender form. Even from this distance, Torin could see the figure's eyes; they shone like two coins.

Torin's heart leaped into his throat.

"An Elorian," he whispered.

At his side, Cam and Hem gave strangled gasps. Steel hissed as the two young men drew their swords. Torin held his own hilt, but he did not draw the blade. The figure ahead seemed peaceful,

a graceful being like a heron upon the water. The Elorian stood alone, staring at the approaching crowd.

The villagers saw him, their step slowed, and they began to mutter, whisper, and point. Torin heard grumbles of "night demon" and "one of them" and even "murderer." More than rage, fear twisted their voices. The fisherman only stood still in the distance, staring at them, perhaps wondering whether they were friend or foe.

"He's no threat," Torin said softly. "He's only a fisherman who wandered too close the border. He—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Ferius howled.

The monk had been howling for hours now, but this sound was different. It was the sound of an enraged beast, a battle cry, the roar of a madman lusting for blood. Ferius raised his lamp overhead, and the light burst out, shooting a glowing ring across the barren landscape. At his sides, his monks raised their own lamps and began to chant. Their song echoed, deep and rumbling.

"Timandra will rise!" Ferius cried. "Our light will bathe the world. Eloria must fall!" He turned toward his followers. "People of Fairwool-by-Night, do not fear this creature. Seize him so we may judge him in the daylight."

Emboldened by the light, the villagers quickened their step, surging along the riverbanks toward the lone figure.

"Ferius, enough of this!" Torin said. He ran toward the monk but could not reach him; the crowd of villagers was too thick. He tried to grab at them instead. "Jorin, listen to me, stop this madness—you're a blacksmith, not a warrior. Talina, you're a milkmaid, not a fighter. Return to your home."

Nobody seemed to notice him. Their voices rose louder and rage twisted their faces. Their eyes burned and their weapons gleamed. Torin looked up at the lone Elorian. The fisherman still stood frozen, watching them approach.

"Run," Torin whispered. "Run, you fool. Why do you wait for them?"

As they drew closer, Torin got a better look at the Elorian, and it froze his breath. The man was ghostly pale, his skin pure white. His large ears protruded from long, smooth hair the color of the moon. He wore white robes embroidered with silver thread, but his feet were bare. Strangest of all were his eyes. Torin gasped to see them. Many people mocked Torin for having unusually large eyes, but this man's orbs were twice the size. They peered right at him, blue and piercing.

They have owl eyes, he thought and shivered. *The stories are true.*

Ferius's pace increased until he was running. His monks ran chanting at his side, and the villagers followed. Voices rang out hoarsely.

"For sunlight!" one man shouted.

"For Yana!" cried another.

"Burn the creature!"

The mob raced forward, but the Elorian only stood still.

Run! Torin thought. *Why do you stand here? Run!*

He stared at the Elorian, and again the creature met his gaze. Torin saw no emotion in those large blue eyes. He wondered if Elorians were no wiser than beasts.

That was when he saw the distant glints farther down the river.

The villagers were too enraged to see; they were focused on the Elorian fisherman. But Torin saw what lay ahead in the darkness, and he exhaled slowly. He understood.

Several miles away, huts rose along the river. Soft lights glowed there, mere specks like the stars above.

"A fishing village," Torin whispered to himself. "He's protecting his home."

When the mob was heartbeats away, the Elorian reached behind his back. He grabbed a hilt and drew a long blade. Torin's

own sword, like all those from his kingdom, was broad and straight and doubled-edged. Its crossguard flared out, and leather wrapped around its hilt. The Elorian's blade, however, was thin and curved. Its guard was but a small disk, and silk wrapped around its hilt. The blade gleamed in the moonlight, revealing mottles in the steel.

"Capture the beast!" Ferius cried, stepping back and letting the mob swarm.

With a shrill cry like a swooping falcon, the Elorian swung his blade. Blood sprayed in a mist, and a villager fell, his chest sliced open.

"Stop!" Torin shouted and trudged forward, barreling between villagers. "Lay down your weapons and end this! Cam, Hem—with me. Let's break this up."

Two villagers dragged the dead man back. Two more lunged at the Elorian, swinging sickles. The pale, large-eyed figure leaned backward, dodging the blades. He leaped up, knees bent, his silken robes fluttering. His sword swung in an arc, and both villagers fell, clutching their chests. Blood spurted between their fingers.

Torin froze, and his sword wavered in his hand. The Elorian moved like dandelion seeds in the wind. He seemed almost to have no weight. He lunged through the air, blade glimmering as it swung down. A villager raised a cleaver, trying to defend himself. The Elorian's sword—a masterwork of pale beauty—knocked the crude blade aside, and this villager too fell, blood gushing.

Torin stared, heart fluttering. His pulse pounded in his ears, and his breath rose to a pant.

This demon will kill us all, he thought.

His legs felt frozen. Sweat drenched him. Torin did not think he could move.

My father would know what to do, he thought. *My father was a great soldier, a war hero, the man who saved the king's life.* Torin clenched his jaw. *I cannot let his spirit down.*

He snapped out of his paralysis. He raced forward, raised his sword, and placed himself between the villagers and the Elorian.

"Enough of this!" he said. "Villagers, stand back. Lower your weapons." He stared into the Elorian's eyes, wondering how much the creature understood. "Elorian, sheathe your blade. Enough blood has spilled."

The Elorian stared at him, those glowing orbs betraying no emotion. Torin shuddered; no humanity seemed to fill this creature.

The Elorian raised his sword.

He leaped again.

He swung his blade toward Torin.

In the instant of that blade swinging down, Torin saw his life flash before his eyes. It was far too short and far too uneventful. He raised his sword to parry.

The two blades clanged together.

Their eyes met again, and for a heartbeat they stood with locked blades—a young man of sunlight, clad in wool and steel, his hair brown and his skin tanned; and a dweller of the night, clad in silk, hair long and pale, skin white, eyes as large as chicken eggs.

They pulled their swords apart, and the blades swung and clashed again, ringing across the desolate landscape. The villagers howled behind, and the Elorian raised his blade high, and Torin knew that he would die here in the wilderness on the border of night.

He clutched his sword, prepared to parry as many blows as he could before the creature cut him down.

He swung his blade.

A shadow slunk behind his foe.

The Elorian raised his blade higher, preparing another swing, when the shadow pounced.

His yellow robes fluttering, Ferius sprang up behind the Elorian. His oil lantern blazed in his hand, showering sparks. The monk slammed the lamp down, shattering it against the Elorian's head.

Glass shards flew and burning oil spilled.

The Elorian's hair ignited. Smoke rose and the smell invaded Torin's nostrils.

Still the creature's blade swung down, but the blow was weak. Torin lashed his own blade, and his parry caught the Elorian's hand, nicking his fingers.

The curved sword flew and clattered down against the riverbank.

"Take him alive!" Ferius said. "Drag him back to daylight."

The villagers swarmed onto the lone warrior, kicking and tugging and twisting his arms. Still the Elorian's hair crackled. A dozen hands grabbed the Elorian. A boot kicked him down. A club swung onto the creature's back, and Torin grimaced to hear the *thud* and *crack*.

Ferius knelt over the fallen warrior, grinning like a vulture hunched over prey. The monk rummaged through the Elorian's robes, hissed, and raised a metal star, a hole in its center. It looked like the weapon Torin had found in Yana's neck.

"Lift the demon!" Ferius said, the throwing star raised in his hand, his face twisted. "Bring him back to Fairwool-by-Night. He will stand trial for the murder of Yana."

A few villagers lifted the bodies of their fallen. Others grabbed the Elorian and manhandled him forth, kicking and spitting upon him.

"I don't know who's worse," said Cam, coming to stand beside Torin. The young shepherd's face was pale. "The Elorian demon or that snake Ferius."

Hem stood shivering, eyes wide with fear. "They're both horrible. I want to go home." He looked pleadingly at Torin. "Can we go home now? Please?"

Torin looked back east toward the distant village of Elorians. He reckoned that about twenty huts rose there, maybe more. Lights twinkled in their windows, and a boat seemed to sway by a dock. Torin wondered if this village was like Fairwool-by-Night, full of humble people afraid of the other side.

"Come on, Tor," said Cam and held his arm. "It's time to go home."

Torin nodded and turned away. They walked back west, following the mob and their prisoner, moving along the river until daylight shone once more, but Torin still felt cold.

CHAPTER FOUR
RAVEN'S FLIGHT

The Elorian stood tied to the pyre, his arms and legs bound to a pole, his feet resting upon kindling. Ferius stood before the prisoner, holding a crackling lamp.

"We shall now decide," Ferius announced, "whether this beast shall live or die."

The entire village had come to watch the trial. If only fifty folk had invaded Eloria to snatch this prisoner, all five hundred Fairwoolians, it seemed, wanted to watch him judged. They stood in the village square, a pebbly expanse. A single tree grew here, the old maple Torin had fallen off so often, his bad eye draining his depth perception. A ring of cottages surrounded the square, built of wattle-and-daub and topped with thatch.

Among the cottages rose the Sailith temple, the only structure built of stone. A golden sunburst crowned its steeple. Outside the temple gates rose a marble statue; it depicted a handsome Timandrian warrior, clad in armor and bearing a sword, stepping upon a fallen Elorian. While the marble Timandrian exuded beauty and nobility, the Elorian figure seemed twisted, its face locked in a grimace, its spine ridge bulging, its tongue dangling.

Torin looked at the statue, then returned his eyes to the living Elorian. While the marble figure seemed base and devious, the Elorian tied to the pyre seemed meek, almost pitiful. All his hair had burned off, and burn marks ran across his scalp. Bruises and cuts covered his flesh. He squirmed and squinted in the sun, his oversized eyes narrowed to mere slits. Ferius and his monks

had tied the creature here only hours ago, yet already the Elorian's skin was reddening in the sunlight.

"This is madness," Bailey said, standing at Torin's side. "This is disgusting."

Shaken after the raid, Cam and Hem had both volunteered for Watchtower duty, freeing Bailey to stand here in the square. Torin's only other ally in the village, the elderly Lord Kerof, had not come to the trial; he lay abed in his home, frail and trembling with the cough.

Torin looked at his foster sister and felt some of his own shakiness leave him. The world seemed an ugly place of late, but Bailey was still beautiful and strong. Freckles lay strewn across her cheeks, and her golden braids shone in the sunlight. She wore her breastplate, green leggings, and tall leather boots. Her sword hung from her belt, her quiver hung across her back, and she clutched her bow.

She is too tall and too taunting and too mischievous, Torin thought. *But now I'm glad that she's standing beside me.*

"Do you think he's the one who killed Yana?" he asked her.

She snorted, watching the monks chant. "Ferius and his cronies want a show, that's all. This is simply their way of consolidating power in our village." She turned toward him, her brown eyes flashing. "Don't you remember the days before Ferius was here? Back before the plague?"

Torin watched a bee fly toward a dandelion that grew between cobblestones. "I do. Everyone in Fairwool-by-Night followed the old Idarith faith. Things seemed more peaceful then." He sighed. "But things always seem more peaceful in memory, don't they?"

She rolled her eyes. "Winky! Don't you see what he's doing? Ferius uses disaster to rally more power. Who did he blame for the plague?"

"Elorians," Torin replied.

She nodded. "Who did he blame for the drought the following year? Elorians again. Every time disaster strikes, Ferius blames them . . . and more people follow him. Already half the villagers have joined his temple, leaving the old god. And this? This is just another way for him to gain more power. Yana's death is just one more tragedy for him to exploit."

It was Torin's turn to roll his eyes. "But Bailey, the Elorians did kill Yana. We were there. We saw her dead. We saw the Elorian star embedded into her neck."

She grabbed his collar. "Did we see them kill her? For all we know, Ferius could have murdered Yana and framed the Elorians."

Torin looked back over at Ferius. The monk was preaching to the people, listing the sins of Eloria. Indeed, he was again mentioning the plague, the drought, and a dozen other tragedies big and small, everything from spring frosts to stillborn lambs. Eloria, he cried out, caused all these evils with their dark magic.

"Look, the man is a snake," Torin said. "I don't doubt that. But preaching hatred is one thing. What you're talking about is *murder*. Even Ferius isn't capable of that."

She raised her eyebrows and gestured at the pyre. "Well, it looks like he's about to murder somebody right now."

Ferius was parading around the pyre, lamp held high. The villagers crowded around him, fists raised, shouting with every offense Ferius announced.

"For the sin of plague that slithered through our town, a venomous snake biting man, woman, and child, I decree this creature guilty." The crowd roared, and Ferius spoke louder. "For the rot that creeps across our gardens, for the drought that dries our farms, and for the pestilence of crows that eat our seeds, I decree this creature . . . guilty!"

The villagers shook their fists, faces red as they shouted for blood. The Elorian stood watching the crowd, tied to the pyre, and finally Torin saw emotion in those oversized eyes.

He saw fear.

Ferius leaped about as if possessed. He was a short man, shorter than Torin, but in his fervor he seemed even larger than the lumbering Hem.

"And for the murder of Yana," the monk cried, "I find this creature guilty. Guilty!"

"Burn him!" shouted the crowd.

Ferius raised his lamp and smiled thinly. "As a monk of the Sailith Order, I condemn this Elorian to—"

Torin had heard enough. He stomped forward and drew his sword.

"Ferius!" he shouted. "Enough of this farce."

The monk froze and turned to face him, his thin smile stretching. Torin stood before the robed man, blade raised. His heart pounded. His knees trembled. He had often clashed with Ferius, but he'd never stood up to him like this, sword in hand.

"And thus Torin the Gardener steps forth," said the monk. "He who grows green things pities the dweller of barren lands. How amusing." Ferius returned his eyes to the crowd. "It seems some among us love the bringer of death and pestilence."

Torin shook with rage. He was tempted to grab Ferius and shake him. He forced himself to speak calmly.

"Ferius, by what right do you judge this man? You do not govern this village—"

"*Man*?" Ferius said, eyebrows rising. "You call this creature a *man*?"

The crowed jeered.

"You know what I mean," Torin said. "He might be an Elorian. He might be our enemy. But you don't know he's the Elorian who killed Yana."

Ferius laughed. He spread his arms wide. "Behold the innocence of youth! Our young gardener believes himself a judge of our enemy. He believes in pitying the cruel. He believes in loving the demons." Ferius's voice rose to a hoarse cry. "But the Sailith Order knows no pity for evil. The Sailith Order will burn all those who seek to destroy us."

Torin gritted his teeth. He stepped closer to Ferius, grabbed the man's robes, and leaned close. He hissed his words between clenched teeth.

"Damn it, Ferius, do you want to start a war? If you kill this Elorian, his people will want vengeance. They will kill more of our people." He shook his head. "Let the poor creature crawl back into the darkness, and let this bloodshed end. Enough have died."

Ferius stood very still and stared at Torin. His skin was sallow, and his eyes were blue beads, so far set they made Ferius look like a wooden doll. When Ferius licked his small teeth, his tongue looked like a fleshy worm emerging from a burrow.

"Innocent child," Ferius said in a low voice, too low for the crowd to hear. "Still you don't see. Bloodshed is exactly what we need."

Torin froze, staring into those pale eyes, and what he saw frightened him as much as all Eloria. He saw madness. He saw bloodlust. And Torin understood.

Bailey was right. He craves chaos. Chaos gives him power.

Torin needed to stop this. He wished Lord Kerof were strong enough to stand here with him, but if the elderly mayor couldn't loosen Ferius's grip on this village, Torin himself would have to. He turned toward the crowd, ready to expose Ferius as a warmonger, when a low voice spoke behind.

The accent was thick. The voice sounded metallic, inhuman, the voice of another world, a sound like water in a deep well or rain upon stones. It spoke only one word, but it gave the word the gravity of an epic tale.

"Friend."

Torin turned to see the Elorian regarding him. The prisoner's face was scarred, his mouth bloody, and his scalp burnt. He spoke again, staring at Torin with soft eyes.

"Friend."

Torin's eyes dampened. This creature had perhaps slain several villagers, maybe even Yana too, but now he pleaded for peace. How could Torin let him die?

Torin turned back toward the villagers and spoke for them all to hear. "The Elorian wants peace! Let us end this conflict. Let us stop the bloodshed now and release him. Let us—"

Before he could complete his sentence, Ferius shrieked. "I sentence the Elorian to death by fire!"

Torin tried to stop him. He grabbed Ferius's cloak and tugged him back. But he was too slow. Laughing maniacally, Ferius tossed his lantern down against the pyre's kindling.

The lantern's oil spilled. The flames raced across the tinder. Torin gasped, doffed his cloak, and tossed it onto the flames. But the fire spread too quickly. Within a few heartbeats, the entire pyre crackled with fire.

The Elorian screamed, struggling against the pole he was tied to.

Torin thrust his sword into the flames, trying to reach the Elorian's ropes and cut him loose. Hands grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back.

Torin spun to see Ferius clutching him. The man sucked in air between his teeth, grinning wildly. He held Torin firmly and whispered into his ear.

"Watch the flames, boy. Watch the glory burn. Feel the heat and see the light of Sailith."

By the time Torin yanked himself free, it was too late. Flames had engulfed the Elorian. The man writhed, burning in the

pyre. The heat blasted out and flames cascaded. Torin had to step back from the fire and pat sparks off his clothes.

"Eloria!" the burning man cried out. "Eloria *tay. Koyee Mai! Talandi, Koyee. Yetana alan."*

The heat and smoke brought tears to Torin's eyes. He found himself kneeling in the square, watching the flames, hearing the man's dying words, words in a language he did not understand. He turned away, lowered his head, and clutched fistfuls of pebbles. Arms engulfed him, and Torin jerked, sure that Ferius was grabbing him again, but instead he found Bailey embracing him.

"Come farther back, Tor," she said softly, guiding him away from the fire. "Your clothes are singed."

He let Bailey guide him back through the crowd. They left the square, climbed Watchtower Hill, and sat in the grass. The Elorian's screams lasted for a long time . . . and finally the man fell silent.

Torin closed his eyes, and he could still hear that single word echoing through his mind, spoken in Ardish, his own tongue.

Friend.

"He wanted our friendship," Torin said, lying in the grass. "He wanted peace. Now his people will want war."

Bailey leaned against him, held him close, and stroked his hair. They sat silently for a long time.

The flames burned for hours, a pillar rising from Fairwool-by-Night, a beacon Torin was sure could be seen from the Nighttower across the border. When finally the fire died to embers, the Sailith monks reached into the ash with pokers and fished out charred bones. Torin watched from the hill, sickness roiling in his belly.

"What are they doing?" Bailey asked, grimacing.

Torin sighed. "Returning the bones with a message."

He watched as Ferius loaded the remains into a wheelbarrow. A second monk stepped forth, holding a raven on a leash.

"Let the heathens see the raven of Arden!" Ferius announced, tethering the bird to the wheelbarrow of bones. "Let them know that we've had our revenge."

Torin swallowed down an urge to gag. Eight kingdoms comprised Timandra, the sunlit half of the world. Fairwool-by-Night lay within Arden, an ancient realm with a raven banner. Torin himself displayed the raven upon his breastplate. Would Elorians know this symbol? Would they see the raven and would they launch an attack against Fairwool-by-Night . . . or against other settlements in Arden?

"The snake wants to ignite a war," Torin said. "He's not just sending a message from Fairwool-by-Night. He wants the Elorians to hate our entire kingdom." He shook his head. "We have to stop this war, Bailey."

She bit her lip. "Is it too late?"

"I don't know," Torin said, "but I have to do something."

He trudged back downhill. With the fire dead, the crowd was dispersing from the square, the villagers returning to their farms and fields. Licking his teeth, Ferius began rolling the wheelbarrow forward. The bones still smoked inside, smelling of burning meat. When Torin gazed upon them, the bones seemed almost human to him; aside from the skull's larger eye sockets, they could have been the bones of a Timandrian. Tethered to the wheelbarrow, the raven began to pick at the charred remains.

Torin reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow's handle, pausing its movement.

"I'll return the bones," he said to Ferius. "Go to your temple. Let me do this."

The two men stood clutching the wheelbarrow. They stared at each other over the smoking bones. Ferius's lip curled back in a snarl.

"Do you feel guilty for killing him, gardener?" the monk asked. "Yes . . . you dueled him, busying his blade, when I brought my fire down upon him. His death is upon you." Ferius licked his chops. "Yes, return him to his filthy kind. And if the creatures attack you, you may call them *friends* as they drive their blades into your flesh."

Ferius clutched the wheelbarrow a moment longer, staring at Torin with unadulterated hatred, then released his grip. Grumbling, Torin shoved the wheelbarrow across the square, wishing it were Ferius who lay charred within.

He wheeled his gruesome charge between the cottages, waving the raven aside whenever it pecked at the bones. Past the village, he headed down a dirt path that led toward the forest; the dusk lay beyond.

"Tor, wait!"

He turned to see Bailey running toward him, her bow bouncing across her back, her two braids swaying. Concern softened her normally mocking brown eyes.

"Go back to the village," he said. "I want to do this alone. Please."

She reached him, grimaced when she saw the bones, and touched Torin's arm.

"Are you sure?" she said. "I can come with you. I can protect you if the Elorians attack. I—"

"No. It's too dangerous. Stay here and protect the village; the people need you." Torin's eyes stung; the damn smoke was still burning them. That last word—*friend*—wouldn't stop echoing. "I need to do this myself."

He left her there upon the path. He wheeled his charge into the forest, walking silently into the shadowy borderlands. For

eighteen years in Fairwool-by-Night, he had never dared enter these shadows. Now, within the turn of a standard hourglass, he was entering the darkness a third time.

He pushed his wheelbarrow through the forest. Progress was slow at first; the wheels bounced over rocks, entangled in grass, and sank into mud. After a mile or two, the sun hung low in the sky, and the brush dwindled to a few scattered bushes and brambles. The Sern River gurgled to the south, its waters orange in the twilight.

The raven cawed, perhaps fearing the dark, and beat its wings madly, stretching its tether.

"Calm yourself, friend," Torin said. He reached to undo the tether and the raven bit him. Torin gasped and pulled his finger to his mouth. The blood tasted coppery and sweet, and Torin remembered cutting the Elorian's fingers to send his sword flying.

I took part in killing him, he thought. *His blood is upon me too.*

When he finally managed to undo the tether, the raven took flight, cawing until it vanished over the dark forest. Torin wondered whether it would find the moth he had seen here, the one shaped like the world.

A raven for the kingdom of Arden, he thought. *A moth with a white wing and black wing, symbol of the world.* He looked at the bones. *And smoking remains like a herald of war.*

There were too many signs in this place, and none soothed him. Torin's belly churned and he took a shaky breath. He had a feeling things would not end here.

He drove the wheelbarrow a little farther, finally reaching the place where they'd captured the Elorian. No more plants grew around him. Far ahead, the sky faded from indigo to deep purple and finally to black, and the stars and moon shone. Upon a distant mountain rose the Nighttower, still only a sliver, but Torin felt that it was watching him.

He stopped the wheelbarrow.

"Goodbye, friend," he said softly and turned to leave.

Back in the west, the sun nearly vanished under the horizon; Torin stood at the very edge of night. He took several steps back toward the day, but that feeling of being watched wouldn't leave him.

Ten more steps and he spun around. He stared into the darkness.

Again that feeling tingled his spine. Somebody was watching him; he was sure of it. With a clammy hand, he gripped the hilt of his sword . . . and then he saw her.

The Elorian stood not far away. She peered from behind a boulder, only her head visible. She seemed young, no older than him. Torin wasn't sure how he knew this, or even how he knew she was female—this was only the second Elorian he'd seen. Yet her soft features all spoke of a young, frightened woman. She had long, smooth hair the color of moonlight, and she wore white fur. Three scars, as from the claws of a beast, marred her face; one tugged her lips into a crooked smile, and the others ran across her cheek and eyebrow. Her eyes—large, oval, and lavender—met his gaze.

For a moment, both she and Torin stood frozen, silent, simply staring. Torin wasn't sure how to react, but he dared not break the stare. He wondered if the Elorian girl would attack him, but no malice filled her eyes; he saw fear and wonder in the purple orbs.

Finally, with a swift movement, the young woman disappeared behind the boulder.

Torin wondered if he should approach, seek her, and try to make amends with this kingdom across the dusk.

What would I say to her? How do I fix this? How would I let her know I'm not her enemy?

He didn't know.

He turned back toward the day, leaving the wheelbarrow and the bones behind.

He returned to Timandra, found Bailey upon the hill, and pulled her into an embrace. He stood with her for a long time, his eyes closed, holding her.

CHAPTER FIVE
KOYEE

She stood upon the Nighttower, the wind billowing her hair, the moon gleaming against her blade. She stared across the plains of darkness—hills and valleys rolling black and lifeless toward the orange horizon, the dusk where the sunlit demons dwelled. She was Koyee Mai, a daughter of the night . . . and a daughter in mourning.

"They killed him, Eelani," she said, holding her father's sword. "They killed my father, then slunk back into the fire. They will kill us all if they can."

Her friend was silent, as she always was. Many claimed that *jatashi*—shoulder spirits—did not exist. Many taunted Koyee for inventing an invisible friend. But Koyee could feel the warmth on her right shoulder, the soft breath against her cheek, the comforting presence of her friend. She held out her hand, letting Eelani crawl from her shoulder onto her palm, a tingle that raised goose bumps along her arm.

"Timandrians," Koyee said, and the word raised goose bumps over the rest of her. "Demons of sunlight. Murderers. I saw one, Eelani. I saw one with my own eyes."

The doubtful also claimed that Timandrians were myths. They claimed that nothing could possibly live in the sunlit half of the world, that the light would burn all flesh.

"But I know what I saw." Koyee tightened her hand around the hilt of her father's sword. "I saw a sunlit demon. He emerged from the dusk."

She herself had smooth white hair, but the demon had sported a head of dark curls like nightwolf fur. She had milky skin, but the creature had a countenance of bronze. Strangest of all had been his eyes—beady eyes half the size of hers, one green and the other black.

"I stared into his eyes, Eelani, and I saw evil." Cold wind moaned, ruffling her tunic of nightwolf fur. "He will return. He will shed more blood."

Koyee had vowed not to cry, yet she felt her eyes dampen. The pain still pulsed through her, fresh and chilling like ice cut from a frozen river. She looked down from the Nighttower to the border of dusk, the place where stone gave way to twisted brambles. She had gone seeking her father, only to find his blade upon the plains, stained with the foul blood of demons. When she had lifted the sword, she had seen the demon emerge from the light, wheeling his cart of bones.

"My father's bones," she whispered, still smelling the smoky scent. "Eelani, I miss him."

She could see his grave below. For many years, her father had stood here upon this very tower, gazing into the dusk, guarding their village that lay below. Some had not believed there was any threat to guard against. Some had called her father a fool, a fisherman who could not forget his old life as a soldier. Now those people mourned him. He had fallen defending this tower, and Koyee had buried him at its base.

"May your spirit continue to watch over me, Father," she whispered, tasting a salty tear. "Goodbye."

She gazed upon Sheytusung, his katana, now her blade to bear. Smiths had forged this sword in the distant city of Pahmey, a mythical realm of crystal towers. They had folded the curved blade a dozen times, hammering it into an edge that remained sharp through the years. Mottles and lines coiled along the steel like the Inaro River that flowed below. Blue silk wrapped around

the hilt, soft and warm in her hand. Twenty winters ago, her father had carried this sword to the great southern war against the Ilari nation; since returning home, he had worn it every day until his last.

"I promise you, Father, I will bear your blade proudly. I will protect our people and I will avenge your death." She whispered the old words of her people. "We are the night."

The wind in her hair, she looked south of the Nighttower toward the village that nestled below, hugging the river.

Oshy. My home.

Twenty round clay huts rose around a cobbled square. Docks spread into the river like fingers, holding a dozen boats. Lanterns swung above the water, casting dapples of light. Only a hundred souls dwelled here, for few in Eloria dared live in the light of dusk, that glow forever in their west. Yet where twilight fell the crayfish bred and thrived, and so the village of Oshy thrived too. Boats sailed down the river, bearing the delicacy to distant lands, returning with pottery, silk, and fur.

"But we need no more pottery, silk, and fur," Koyee said to her invisible friend. "We need more swords. We need soldiers. I bear the only blade in our village, and if Timandra attacks again, I cannot defend this village alone. Eelani, we must travel down the river. We must find the distant city of Pahmey, the place where this sword was forged, where brave souls train for war." Her throat tightened. "We must tell them Timandrians are real, and we must return with aid."

Her friend was silent as always, but Koyee felt a warm embrace against her cheek, a breath against her ear, a stroke along her hair. Eelani was agreeing, but the spirit was afraid.

"I'm afraid too," Koyee said. "I fear the light of day. I fear the heat of sunfire. I fear the creatures that dwell there. And I fear being alone."

She lowered her head, letting the wind whip her hair across her eyes, smooth pale strands like silk. Yes, she was alone now. Her brother, her only other family, had left Oshy ten years ago. He had sailed south along the river, dreaming of becoming a *shaikin*—a warrior for hire. He had been only sixteen, and Koyee had not seen him since.

The years had gone by, and Koyee herself was sixteen now but still unwed. A few young villagers still courted her, but others shunned her, perhaps fearing her scars. Two years ago, she had gone hunting and a feral nightwolf had attacked her, clawing her face. Three lines now marred her countenance. One scar tugged the corner of her mouth, raising her lips into a permanent, crooked smile. The other ran below her eye, and the third crossed her forehead, halving an eyebrow. Koyee didn't care. She saw little value in physical beauty, and she had never desired marriage. She was happier hunting on the starlit plains, even after her injury, than entertaining suitors. And so when men courted her, she turned them back, and when men shunned her, she felt no shame.

She loved Oshy but she'd always dreamed of leaving too, of following her brother downriver. She was destined for more than trawling for crayfish, yet she had never dared leave her father. And so she had stayed here, year after year, fishing the river, and dreaming of someday sailing away—of finding the crystal city, of seeing the silver caves where thousands lived underground, or discovering the Chanku Crater where men rode tamed nightwolves.

"We always dreamed of leaving on an adventure, Eelani," she said. "Yet now we must leave on a quest. Now we must find swords and men to wield them, or I fear the daylight will burn us all."

Koyee sheathed her blade. The scabbard, its black leather inlaid with silver fish, lay against her thigh. She left the tower top,

descending the path that coiled around the stone steeple like a trail around a mountain.

When she reached the hill below, she approached her father's grave. She had buried the bones herself and piled a cairn of river stones upon them. Her father had always loved the river. Koyee knelt by the grave and whispered a prayer.

"Watch over me, Father. Protect me on my journey. You died defending our home. I will walk in your path. Your light will forever guard me." A tear streamed to her lips. "Goodbye."

She left the grave, heading across the plain of stones, dust, and boulders. The stars gleamed above. The river flowed ahead. To her east stretched the endless night, and to her west the dusk glowed, a scar across the land, a burn mark that would forever sear her soul.

She reached the village of Oshy, the only home she'd ever known. She walked between its clay huts. Silver moonstars, the runes of Qaelin—one of Eloria's empires—glowed upon round doors. Bat houses hung from roofs, their denizens staring from within. Lanterns swung upon poles, their tin shaped into faces of nightwolves, snakes, and other beasts, tallow burning behind their staring eyes.

Her fellow villagers gazed upon her too. Slender people clad in fur, their white hair billowed in the wind. Strings of shells clinked around their necks. As Koyee walked among them, they whispered prayers and blessed her.

"Koyee Mai," they said, reaching out toward her, speaking her new title—"mai", a woman with no father or husband. "We pray for him, Koyee Mai. We pray for you."

She nodded, throat tight. "The moonlight blesses him now. I pray that it blesses us all."

As she walked among them, they shed tears and sang softly, hands raised to the sky.

"Everyone loved my father, Eelani," Koyee whispered. "Do you see how they loved him? He was the guiding star of our village. He was the guiding star of my life."

She thought words she dared not speak. *But we will need more than blessings now. Timandrians are real, and they thirst for blood. Now we need not only prayers, but steel and armor.*

She approached her home, the round hut where she'd been born. The door, built of leather stretched over bone, creaked as she opened it. Koyee stepped inside.

Embers glowed in a brazier, heating a pot of crayfish stew. Alcoves filled the walls, holding candles, pottery, river stones, jars of mushrooms, and bundles of dried fish. Three beds stood at the back, fur blankets topping their bone frames. One bed had belonged to her brother; it had stood here empty and cold for ten years. Another had belonged to her father; it too would remain barren.

Koyee forced herself to look away. She could not surrender to tears now. Not if Timandrians existed, not if more could attack. She raised her chin, tightened her fist around her hilt, and swallowed a lump in her throat.

"The journey east will be long, Eelani," she said. "We must travel as fast as we can."

She packed silently, filling a sack with jars of food, her hourglass, and some candles. Into her pouch, she placed all the money she had—a single copper coin.

"It's not much, and I don't know if the food will last. But it will have to do. Now say goodbye to our home and don't cry. You have to be strong, Eelani. You have to be strong like Father was."

Her katana at her side and her sack slung across her shoulder, she left her home.

As she walked across the village square, the cobblestones cold against her bare feet, the wind pierced her fur tunic, and Koyee shivered.

Past the last few huts, she reached the boardwalk of Oshy, the heart of the village. The river flowed, lit with moonlight, a silver stream that sang a familiar song. Stone docks stretched into the water, black arms in the night. A dozen junk boats sailed here, their hulls built of leather stretched over whale ribs, their battened sails painted with the moonstar of the Qaelin empire. Lanterns hung upon their masts, casting pale light.

Bare-chested men moved along the boat decks, raising nets woven of tendons and hair, pulling in crayfish, clams, and bass. Women knelt beside them, sorting the catches into tin bowls, collecting the valuable creatures and tossing minnows back into the water. The familiar scents filled Koyee's nostrils—fish and burning tallow and the sweat of labor. It was the smell of home, a smell Koyee loved.

"Koyee Mai," the fishermen and their wives said. They lowered their heads, and the wind fluttered their hair. "We will pray for you. May the moonlight bless you on your journey."

Throat tight, she nodded. "I will bring back aid. I swear to you, my friends. I will tell the elders of Pahmey of the demons that dwell here. I will return with help, I promise you."

Every villager she passed handed her a gift—silver thread, a dried mushroom, a bone hook, a ridged seashell, a jar of fireflies. They were humble gifts. They were the best gifts she had ever received.

She walked along the docks, heading toward the *Lodestar*, her father's boat. It was a small vessel, just large enough for one or two, its hull built of leather and bone. Koyee climbed inside and her eyes stung. For sixteen years, she would board *Lodestar* with her father, sail along the water, and fill nets with crayfish.

"Now I sail alone," she whispered. "Now I sail with no net in the water. Now I sail farther than I've ever gone."

The people of Oshy gathered along the docks, staring silently, all one hundred of them. They raised their hands to the

moon and chanted prayers. Little Linshani, the daughter of the village potter, played old tunes with a bone flute—songs of moonlight and blessings.

Koyee untethered her boat, grabbed an oar, and steered away from the docks. The current caught *Lodestar*, moving it east along the water.

"Farewell, Koyee Mai!" cried Yinlan, the elderly bead-maker with the stooped back; he had once made Koyee a pair of ill-fitting but warm fur mittens. His eyes watered as he stood upon the docks, watching her leave. "May the constellations bless you. We pray for you, our daughter, our light in the dark."

She raised her hand, a silent gesture of farewell, and her throat felt too tight for speech. As her boat moved downriver, she remained standing, facing the village and watching it dwindle into the distance, and she kept her hand raised. The villagers of Oshy remained on the docks, singing for her until their song vanished in the distance, and the lights of Oshy sank behind the horizon.

Koyee stood alone in the boat. She heard nothing but the flowing water and cold breeze.

For the first time in her life, she did not see the dusk. No more orange glow filled the west, for the Inaro River took her into the great night, the black lands of Eloria. The stars and moon shone above, and the plains of her homeland spread all around her, dark and cold and barren.

"But you're with me, Eelani," she whispered and felt her invisible friend upon her shoulder. "And my father's sword is with me. We will not fail. We will save our village."

She turned toward the prow. The river stretched ahead of her, a single strand of silver in endless blackness. Koyee stood, holding her hilt, watching the stars and moon. In the darkness, she could still see the eyes of the demon, one green and one black, small and staring.

CHAPTER SIX
THE TOWERS OF PAHMEY

She thought the wilderness would never end.

Koyee stood upon her boat's prow, watching the darkness of Eloria spread all around. She had spent her life in Oshy upon the border, the glow of the day always to her west, but here full night engulfed every horizon. The moon shone overhead, casting its light upon the Inaro River and rocky plains. Distant black hills rolled to her south, silver limning their facades. Ahead, in the east, she saw only shadows.

The great constellations shone above: the dragon, the snake, the wolf, and many others. Koyee looked up at those stars and sought her constellation, the stars of the leaping fish. Most people worshiped the bright constellations of noble beasts. The fish was smaller and dimmer, but Koyee had chosen it long ago, not only because she was the daughter of a fisherman, but also because she felt sorry for the stars nobody prayed to. And so they had become *her* stars, and she prayed to them now.

"Protect me on my journey, Sky Fish. Look after me, and look after the spirit of my father."

She returned her eyes to the landscape, seeking the lights of a distant city, of the great Pahmey. She had heard so many tales of the place. They said that hundreds of thousands of people lived there. Koyee had spent her life in Oshy among a hundred souls; she could not imagine a thousand, let alone hundreds of thousands. They said the towers of that city touched the stars themselves, and that a million lamps glowed in windows and upon

walls. Surely a city like that would shine like the moon itself, casting its glow for miles.

And yet, as *Lodestar* flowed downriver, Koyee saw no lights. Once she passed another boat, a dinghy with a lamp, two fishermen, and a single sail. The men waved at her and rowed on. She saw no more life.

Leaving the prow, she checked her hourglass, which she had placed upon the deck. Its bottom bulb was painted with a moon, the top with a sun. A few years ago, a peddler had sold her this trifle for five copper coins. The crazy old man had claimed that millennia ago the world would turn, night following day in an endless dance.

"The sand will flow from moon to sun for the length of an ancient day," he had said, presenting her with the hourglass. "The world has fallen still, but with this masterwork, you can measure the passage of stilled time. It's how they tell time in the big, eastern cities."

Koyee had laughed, thinking him a fool, but bought the hourglass, for its paintings were pretty and its sand glittered like gold. Of course the man had spoken only legends, but Koyee liked to pretend. Since that day years ago, she often let her hourglass run from day to night, then flipped it over again, pretending that the world still spun like in the stories, that the day of Timandra would shine upon Eloria, then retreat again. Often Koyee found it comforting to sleep throughout the night of her hourglass, waking as the sand filled its sunny bulb.

She gazed at the timepiece now. When first sailing out, she had set it sunny-side up, and now the sand was almost drained into its night half. Koyee yawned and her stomach rumbled. She rummaged through her pack and produced a jar of matsutakes—long pale mushrooms she favored. She ate them slowly, savoring each one, letting the earthy flavor spread across her tongue.

"We'll have to ration this food, Eelani," she said to her shoulder spirit. "It's only enough for several days, and I don't know where we'll find more, so don't be greedy."

She raised a mushroom to her shoulder and let Eelani eat. Sometimes she almost believed that Eelani truly nibbled, that the morsels grew smaller. Other times she thought she was crazy. She smiled, placed the mushroom in her mouth, and chewed slowly.

The last grain of sand in the hourglass faded into night. Koyee yawned and stretched.

"Will you watch over the boat, Eelani?" she asked. "I'm sleepy."

She could not be sure, but she thought she felt a weight lift from her shoulder, and the moonlight—for just an instant—seemed to catch a figure leaping onto the prow. Koyee smiled, flipped the hourglass over, and curled up on the boat floor.

She slept.

She woke and she slept again.

The hourglass turned and turned, a dance like the old days of the world.

The eternal night stretched on, as it had for thousands of years. The hourglass danced, its days following nights, and still Koyee sailed east upon the water, and still she saw no city lights.

One day they flowed through a field of crystals that covered the land, gleaming in the moonlight, a carpet of diamonds. The stars reflected in each one, and Koyee could barely tell sky from land. She felt as if the *Lodestar* floated along a stream of starlight, lost in an endless night sky.

Another day the river led her between towering cliffs, revealing only a strip of sky that mirrored the river. Coiling silkworms nestled upon the stone walls, each as large as Koyee, glowing blue and white and blinking lavender eyes. They crawled across the cliffs, weaving curtains of their silk that swayed and shimmered like ghosts, brushing against Koyee as she sailed by.

A third day and jagged boulders rose on the riverbanks, carved with faces, the eyes gleaming with emeralds. Each face rose larger than her boat, watching as she sailed by. Koyee did not know who had carved these sentinels, but they seemed ancient, their features smoothed with years of rain and wind. Nighthawks nested upon them, hundreds of black birds with silver eyes. As her boat sailed by, the flocks took flight, shrieked, and circled the moon before landing upon the faces again.

A fourth day and the river widened, and life bustled in the waters. Snakes with purple scales swam around her, coiling and uncoiling, and shimmering whales with translucent skin breached for air, their bones and organs alight. Blue fish leaped from the waters, trilling songs more beautiful than flutes and harps. One fish jumped into her boat; Koyee and Eelani blessed its gift and fed upon it.

She kept sailing and still the hourglass turned. And still the sand moved from day to night, and still they saw no city lights.

Sometimes Koyee wondered if Oshy was the lone settlement in Eloria, a humble village on the edge of dusk, and the rest of her realm was only plains of darkness and legends of light. Other times, Koyee feared that she had passed the city of Pahmey while she slept, and that Eelani—cursed, silent Eelani—had not woken her. Most times, Koyee simply stood at the prow, staring ahead into the darkness, and remembered.

So many memories floated here in the dark. She remembered the time her brother had left them, a youth with angry eyes, out to seek his fortune—much like Koyee now. She remembered the times playing *xin* with her father, a game of moving shells upon a bone. And she remembered burying his own bones. And she remembered the Timandrian who had returned them, the young demon with one green eye, one black—eyes like the world.

"He stared right at me," she whispered to the river. "He stared at me, and I thought he would attack me, but he only stared. He only left the bones and returned to his land of sunfire." She lowered her head. "I wonder, Eelani, if more are attacking our village as we sail here. I wonder if we will bring aid fast enough."

The days stretched on, some days alight with crystals and fish, others dark and silent and long, days of flowing through endless darkness that even Koyee's large eyes could not pierce. Her jars of preserves dwindled, and she lifted her rod and fished as she sailed. Here in the deep dark, far from the dusk, the fish were different—bulbs of light tipped their spines, some carried fleshy lanterns upon stalks, and others glowed with inner lights. They were beautiful things of blue and purple scales, and their flesh was white and tender. They lit Koyee's way and filled her stomach. She sailed on through the night.

On the tenth hourglass turn, nibbling on fish bones, Koyee saw the lights ahead and lost her breath.

* * * * *

She propped herself onto wobbly elbows, leaned forward, and squinted. At first she thought these were more crystals reflecting the moonlight, or perhaps only an illusion of her lonely mind. The lights gleamed miles away, rising from the horizon, a cluster that glowed blue and green and silver.

"Do you see them too, Eelani?" she asked. The spirit hopped upon her shoulder, and Koyee could swear she felt her invisible friend tug her hair.

She rose to her feet, teetered toward the prow with arms extended for balance, and stared into the distance. Cold wind ruffled her hair, scented of spices and sweetness. The clump of lights grew larger, emerging from the horizon to reveal soaring,

thin towers. Lights gleamed within them in all colors, brighter than the stars.

"It's a city," Koyee whispered and her eyes dampened. "It's a great city of glass and light. We will find aid here."

The river took her closer, revealing more of the city. Dozens—maybe hundreds—of towers rose here, smaller in the outskirts and rising into great pillars in the center. Bridges ran between them, snaking like the tangled lines of fishermen. Walls surrounded the city, topped with strings of lanterns like glimmering dew upon cobwebs. More lights gleamed upon the water below the city; hundreds of boats sailed upon the river, entering and leaving the hub of light.

Koyee trembled as she stood at the prow; whether she shook from fear or excitement, she didn't know.

"The city of Pahmey," she whispered. "The jewel of the Qaelin nation. We sail toward one of the greatest cities in all of Eloria."

As they drew nearer, the river widened and many boats sailed around them. Some rose thrice the *Lodestar*'s height, windows lining their hulls, their battened sails wide and painted with silver moons; merchants sauntered upon their decks, clad in blue silks embroidered with stars, their bellies ample and their hats wide. Other boats were long and narrow and creaky; bare-chested fishermen rowed them, and fish flapped in baskets upon their decks. Some boats seemed built for pleasure; wealthy women stood upon them, their silks embroidered with dragons, their jewels alight, their faces painted white and blue.

Koyee dipped her oar in the water and navigated around the other boats. Dozens flowed around her, lanterns swinging, and beads of light glimmered upon the water. She drew closer to the city, and its light too fell upon her. She craned her neck back and gasped.

Pahmey was built of stone, crystal, and glass. Walls surrounded its innards, a shell of smooth, black bricks that reflected the lights like a starry sky. Hundreds of guards stood upon the walls, clad in silvery scales. Their long white hair flowed in the wind, but steel visors filigreed with runes hid their faces. Each man held a spear, its shaft bearing the banner of the Qaelin empire—a moon within a star. Iron statues—dragons, wolves, and serpents—rose between the wall's guardians, lanterns burning in their eyes, sentinels of metal and fire.

Behind the walls rose the towers of Pahmey. Koyee saw dozens of them, molded of crystal and glass. People moved behind their windows, their silken robes flowing. Some towers were green, others blue. The tallest among them rose from the city center, its crystal walls silver, its crest shaped like a full moon. Koyee had heard travelers speak of this place, and she gasped to see it. Here rose Minlao Palace, the palace of moonglow, the center of Pahmey's power. Distant figures seemed to move within that crystal moon, watching the city.

"The elders of Pahmey live up there, Eelani," Koyee whispered, pointing at the palace. "They are very wise, and they can help us."

But most amazing of all, Koyee thought, were not these towers but what floated above them. Her father had told her stories of hot air balloons, but Koyee had always thought them only legends. Yet here, above Pahmey, she saw several of the flying ships. Each one seemed a hundred times larger than her boat. Patchworks of silk formed each balloon, blue and gold and white, and men stood within their baskets, gazing down upon the crystal city.

"Pahmey," Koyee whispered. "Look at it, Eelani. It's a bit larger than home, isn't it?" She smiled. "Do you think we'll find my brother here?"

After leaving home years ago, had Okado too found his way to this hub of light? Did he even stand upon these walls now, looking down upon her, a guard of the city? Koyee had not seen her brother since she'd been only six; if she met Okado here, would she even recognize him? She gripped the hilt of Sheytusung, the silk soft and comforting.

The city docks stretched out ahead. Koyee steered her boat toward them, dodging junk ships large and small. The docks spread out like the branches of trees back in the dusk. Countless vessels swayed here, tethered to posts, some great ships with wide sails and lofty masts, others fishing dinghies no larger than her own. Koyee oared carefully, nearly knocking into a towering ship with three stories of portholes. She maneuvered around a buoy, past a pier bustling with fishermen, and toward a dock lined with boats.

As Koyee rowed along, searching for a place to moor, people bustled about the docks. Some walked toward the city, bearing baskets of leather and bone, fish and clams and crabs clattering inside. A few people seemed to be merchants; they wore rich silks embroidered with silver and gold, and jewels hung around their necks. Some were buskers, playing lutes and harps or singing for coins, while others sat and begged. One boy, a scrawny little thing clad only in a loincloth, grabbed a coin from a merchant's pocket, then dived into the water and swam away.

"So many people, Eelani!" Koyee said. "There might be thousands of them. *Hundreds* of thousands. I never imagined so many people could live in one place."

Koyee looked down at her clothes, a simple tunic of white fur, leaving her legs and feet bare. Nobody else here wore fur; most people wore silk, the fabrics elaborate and embroidered. Koyee had never felt poorer, never felt so much the humble fisherman's daughter from Oshy.

One hand oaring, the other holding her katana's hilt, she finally saw an empty place along the docks. She steered her boat near, slowed down, and let *Lodestar* bump against the mooring. Gingerly, she climbed out of the boat.

As she stood on the dock, her head spun and her legs wobbled. She had spent ten hourglass days in her boat, and she almost fell. The world swayed around her, the ships bobbing and the city towers tilting. It was several moments before Koyee steadied herself, grabbed a rope, and tethered her boat to a peg. Children scampered around her, reaching for her pockets, and Koyee glared and slapped their hands away. They fled, knocking over a fisherman's box of crabs, sending the creatures to scuttle across the docks and around Koyee's feet.

She hefted her belt and gave her boat a last look. She would miss the solitude of the river, the song of the water, and the tranquility of the darkness. But she had not left Oshy to sail aimlessly. Here in this great city she would find aid for her home.

With a deep breath, her legs still wobbling, Koyee took a step away from her boat. She walked across the docks, heading toward the city.

She stepped onto a boardwalk of cobbled flagstones. Pewter lanterns swung above her, shaped like fish with glowing eyes. Fishermen rummaged through their nets, sorting their catches into tin barrels. Koyee saw angler fish that sprouted glowing stalks, clattering isopods larger than her head, eels whose skin flashed with light, and other creatures adapted to life far from the glow of dusk. One fisherman, a mere youth, began to hawk flapping lanternfish to passersby. Soldiers, looking like fish themselves in scale armor, hustled the boy aside, shouting at him to pay for a market stall within the walls. The boy stuck out his tongue, pelted a soldier with a dead fish, and turned to flee.

Koyee's head spun. She had never seen so many people—or types of seafood!—in her life. Nostrils flaring to inhale every

scent, she walked across the boardwalk, heading toward the city walls.

Towering gates rose ahead, leading from the boardwalk into Pahmey. Two towers flanked them, their indigo bricks sporting golden reliefs of moons and stars. Upon the battlements, more than a hundred feet above, stood guards in steel scales, bows in their hands, visors hiding their faces. Between these towers rose an archway; it looked tall enough for ships to sail through. A dragon mosaic gleamed upon the keystone, its scales formed of blue tiles, its eyes gleaming sapphires; here was an image of Shenlai, the fabled dragon of Qaelin, who was said to live far in the east. Beneath this coiling guardian, granite doors stood open, revealing cobbled streets lined with stone-and-glass homes.

"These walls are tall and strong," Koyee said to Eelani, "and many guards protect them. But if the Timandrians sweep across this land, demons of sunfire, will even this city fall?" She sighed. "I hope we never find out."

She walked toward the gates, resisting the urge to crane her neck back too often. If she gaped, she would reveal herself to be a foreigner, an easy target for pickpockets. Instead she breathed deeply, squared her shoulders, and tried to walk confidently across the cobblestones. All around her the crowd bustled—fishermen carrying baskets of fish, farmers pushing wheelbarrows of mushrooms, and beggars and urchins scampering about. Several merchants rode upon palanquins with silk curtains; liveried servants carried the loads, bells ringing around their necks. The smells of fresh fish, tangy mushrooms, perfumes, and sweat all filled Koyee's nostrils, vying for dominance, an intoxicating aroma both sickly and sweet.

When she reached the archway, she saw that a dozen guards stood here. They wore scales, and their helmets were shaped like the heads of beasts, horned and snarling. Each guard held a spear and wore a katana at his belt. Two stone pots stood within the

archway, shaped as demons with gaping maws. Before entering the city, every person dropped a coin into a granite mouth, letting the toll chink against a treasure.

Koyee grimaced and paused.

"I didn't realize we'd have to pay," she said to Eelani. "We have only one coin."

She bit her lip, reached into her pouch, and fished out her single piece of copper. She hefted it in her palm, staring at the moonstar on its surface. She had no food or drink left; she had hoped to buy more with this coin.

"We'll have to pay. It would be no good to have come all this way, Eelani, only to be turned back at the gates." She bit her lip, rolled her eyes, and snorted. "We'll be poor and hungry, but we'll find a way to survive. We'll think on our feet."

She tightened her lips and walked closer to the city. As she neared a pot of coins, she glanced in and saw enough money to feed her until old age. Her eyes widened as the light fell upon her face.

A guard clanked toward her, and a rough hand grabbed Koyee and yanked her back.

"Don't think of stealing these coins, urchin, like you stole that pretty sword."

Koyee tugged herself free and glared at the guard. She couldn't see his face, only a visor shaped like a screaming demon. He stood a head taller than her, but Koyee placed her hands on her hips and raised her chin.

"I did not steal my sword," she said. "And I'm no urchin. I'm the daughter of a great warrior."

The guard laughed, voice echoing behind his visor. "You're dressed like a fisherman's daughter and you smell like one too. Your sword's a pretty thing, though; what dead man did you steal it off?"

The words drove into her, themselves a blade. She bared her teeth at the guard. She raised her coin, holding it tight between her fingers.

"I have a coin," she said. "It's copper. Is this enough to enter?"

"Toss it into the pot with the rest. And be careful, girl. Many fishermen's daughters come to Pahmey seeking their fortunes. We fish many out of the river." He snorted. "If I were you, I'd turn back toward whatever village you're from. This city crushes dreams."

She snorted too. "Did *you* come here dreaming of glory, then ended up a humble guard? Don't take out your bitterness on me."

The man growled and raised his hand, ready to strike her. Koyee scampered back, tossed her coin into the pot, and stuck her tongue out at the guard. He cursed and stepped toward her, reaching for his sword. She turned and raced into the city, leaving him behind at his post.

* * * * *

Koyee had promised herself she wouldn't gape, but as she walked down the city street she couldn't help it. Her head tilted back, her eyes widened, and her jaw hung open.

Buildings lined the street, rising several stories tall. Their bricks were made of opaque glass; Koyee could see the moonlight, the stars, and even her own form reflected within them. Some bricks were deep blue, others gray, and some silver, and some seemed molded of many colors mixed together. Atop these buildings rested roofs of green ceramic tiles, their corners slanting out and upward. Bronze statues topped some roofs, shaped as dancing maidens or animals. More statues—these of

dragons—stood on the roadsides, their claws holding tallow lanterns.

"This sure beats the mud huts at home, doesn't it, Eelani?" she whispered.

She had thought the docks busy, but even thicker crowds bustled along this street. The wealthy traveled on palanquins. Soldiers patrolled afoot, armor clattering and spears thumping against the cobblestones. Children scampered underfoot. All along the roadsides, sellers stood hawking their wares; thousands of tin and pewter dishes displayed every sort of treasure Koyee could imagine. Some peddlers sold mushrooms: piles of yellow chanterelles, aromatic milkcaps, purple blewits, and fuzzy maitakes that reminded Koyee of brains. Other peddlers hawked fresh fish, urchins, and clams caught in the river. Some merchants sold gemstones, clay dolls, and even glass amulets that trapped the glowing lights of fish.

Koyee's stomach gave a growl, and she longingly eyed a dish full of truffles.

"I wish we still had that coin," she said. "I'm famished. I know you are too, Eelani." She patted her empty belly. "We'll have to do without for a while. We have to think of Eloria's safety before we think of our belly."

She looked up past the bustling market. The towers rose ahead, green and silver and blue, all built of the same glass and crystal. Minlao Palace loomed above the rest, its moon-shaped dome watching the city like a great eye.

"That's where we must go. That's where we must seek aid."

She nodded, ignored the scents of food, and trudged onward.

She walked through the market, coiling along its busy streets, before finally emerging into boulevards lined with pagodas. These homes seemed large as mansions to Koyee, their sloping roofs upturned at the edges like curling parchment.

Statues guarded gardens of mushrooms and curtains swung from windows. Even the bat houses here, ornate structures of brass and bronze, seemed finer than the huts back in Oshy.

Women with painted faces walked these streets in flowing robes, seeming to Koyee, with her simple tunic and bare feet, like ghosts from a story. Golden sashes encircled their waists, and glass beads hung around their necks, trapping the glow of anglerfish lures. Their hands looked powdered and soft while hers were callused, and their faces seemed so fair while hers was scarred.

She whispered to Eelani, "I wager the people of these streets never gutted a fish, dug through rocky ground for truffles, or built walls of clay."

As she kept walking, she passed a temple, its marble columns topped with dragon capitals. A glass dome rose above the columns, large enough that Koyee thought it could have enclosed all of Oshy. When she peered between the columns, she saw priests with flowing white beards and flowing white robes. Starlight fell upon them through the glass dome. They sang to the constellations, voices deep and sonorous; Koyee found the melody strangely sad, a song that sounded ancient and beautiful, sweet yet melancholy, like a warm memory in a cold place.

She kept walking, moving away from the temple. Across a cobbled square rose a great pagoda—this one not a home but a castle—its five tiers of roofs tiled blue, its walls lined with archers. Deeper into the city, towers began to rise. The first towers Koyee passed rose little taller than the surrounding houses, but soon they grew larger. Even when Koyee craned her neck all the way back, she couldn't see their tops.

She must have walked for a full hourglass day before she reached Minlao Palace. When finally she stood before it, she felt smaller than a speck of dust, smaller than a single star in the sky. The tower loomed above her, carved of silver crystal. It was easily

the tallest tower in the city. High above, its dome shone like a second moon, giving the palace its name—Minlao, the glow of the moon.

"Well, here we are," she said. "If there's any help in the world, it lies here."

She squared her shoulders and ignored another rumble in her belly. She walked toward the tower gates.

More guards stood here, but these ones wore no armor. White robes flowed across them, and their hair flowed just as white and smooth. Their large, lavender eyes blinked at her. They held halberds and swords hung across their backs, their hilts wrapped in silver silk. Koyee stood five feet tall, average height for a girl from Oshy; these guards towered two feet taller.

She marched up toward them, placed her hands on her hips, and tried to speak in a loud and steady voice.

"I am Koyee Mai, daughter of Salai from the village of Oshy. Our village has been attacked. Do the elders of Pahmey dwell here? I must deliver this news."

She wondered if the guards would flinch at "Mai," the title of a woman with no father, brother, or husband; she knew that some spurned the mai, calling them loose women. These towering, robed guards only smiled, though no warmth filled their eyes.

"Welcome to Minlao Palace," said one; his face was oval and his forehead high, and silver paint coiled across his jutting cheeks. "The elders of Pahmey watch their children from this tower. They are wise and see far. You need not fear, child of Oshy, for you are safe here, and the elders defend the great nation of Qaelin."

Koyee cleared her throat. "I'm sure they're very wise indeed and see very far from up there. But Oshy lies a great distance from here, all the way on the border with Timandra." She took a

step closer. "The Timandrians have attacked us. I must speak with the elders."

The guards stepped closer together, barring her passage. Again, the guard with the silvery face smiled upon her.

"Many come here wishing to speak with the elders," he said. He swept his arm behind him, gesturing at the palace gates. "Behold all who've come to hear their wisdom."

Koyee stood on tiptoes, tilted sideways, and peered at the tower's base. Her heart sank. Along cobbled streets and squares she saw a crowd of people all gathered together, standing still, waiting.

She gulped. "I cannot stand here and wait with them! My village needs help. All of Eloria could burn if Timandrians now dare pass the dusk. Take me to your elders at once."

The guards cleared their throats and blinked again.

The silvery-cheeked guard opened a scroll. It rolled down to his feet. Hundreds of ribbons, all of different colors and designs, were pinned to the parchment. With a quill, he inked a word onto the scroll.

"Koy Mai . . ." he mumbled, jotting down letters.

"Ko*yee* Mai," she corrected him. "Ko-*yee*. Of Oshy."

He coughed uncomfortably, scratched out the letters, and wrote again. "Ko*yee* Mai of Oshy. Here to speak of ancient spirits."

"Timandrians," she said. "And they're not ancient spirits. They're real. They've alive. They're dangerous."

But the guard had already placed the quill back into his belt. He plucked a blue-and-silver ribbon from the scroll and handed it to her.

"You are now four-hundred and seventy-third in line to see the elders." He smiled pleasantly. "We will call your name when your time comes."

Koyee raised her eyebrows and groaned. "How long will it take?"

"We approximate . . . forty-seven turns of a standard hourglass."

"But . . ." Koyee sputtered. "But I can't wait that long! That's almost two moons! I already spent ten hourglass turns sailing here from Oshy. What if more Timandrians attack? I have to speak to them *now*."

She marched forward, trying to push her way between the guards.

The men calmly pressed closer together, blocking her way. Koyee growled, but there were ten of them, each one twice her size.

"Thank you for requesting an audience with the elders," said one, voice as pleasant as ever, his smile stoic. "Feel free to wander Pahmey and enjoy its sights while you wait. We will call your name when your turn has come."

Koyee marched away with clenched fists, her shoulders stooped and her eyebrows bunched together. Timandrians had invaded Eloria and slain her father—they *were* real, not just ancient spirits—and these guards simply dismissed her? She fumed.

Yet what could she do—stand on a street corner and shout of the threat? Koyee had a feeling that would only land her in a dungeon. Leave this city and travel farther east, walking across rocky plains to Yintao, capital of Qaelin? That journey could take three or four moons, even if she had enough supplies. Marching away, Koyee stuffed the ribbon into her pocket.

"Well, Eelani, old friend, we might just have to wait." A sigh flowed across her. "Maybe the wait will be shorter than the guards said. I just pray no more Timandrians emerge from the dusk until those stuffy elders send soldiers Oshy's way."

Her belly rumbled, and Koyee swore she could hear a tiny rumble from above her shoulder.

"You're hungry too, I know, Eelani." Koyee bit her lip. "But we've got no food. I'd return to the river and fish, but we've got no coins left, and we wouldn't be able to reenter the city. We're going to need to find something to eat, even if we steal it. Do you know how to steal, Eelani?"

Her spirit friend was silent as always.

Koyee wandered along the streets, belly empty and legs weak. Weariness tugged on her, stronger even than her hunger; she hadn't slept in an hourglass's night. She wanted to return to the market, to try to steal or beg for a meal, but could not remembered the way back, and she felt too tired to keep walking.

She found an alleyway, crawled inside, and sat against a wall. Above between the roofs, she saw the fish constellation, her stars, and the sight comforted her. Perhaps here too she was blessed.

Koyee pulled her knees to her chest, lowered her head, and slept. She dreamed of glass towers, swinging lanterns, and demons of sunfire streaming through city streets.

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE DUST FACE GHOSTS

Pat. Pat. The noise thumped in the abyss. *Pat. Hiss.*

Koyee mumbled in the darkness, clouds of mist shrouding her.

Hiss. Thump thump. Swish.

The creature was stalking her, a beast of shadow, fur bristling, tail flailing. For an instant its eyes blazed, two white lanterns, then vanished. Its growl rumbled.

Koyee raised her spear, its iron shaft wrapped in fur. The tip glinted in the moonlight.

"Go away!" she called.

But it would not; it was a nightwolf of the plains, and she was its prey.

"Here's a pretty thing," whispered the creature, voice like wind over pebbles, like silk across flesh. "Here's a prize for old Snaggletooth."

The darkness closed in around her. Cold sweat drenched her. She tensed, raised her spear, and the creature pounced. Its teeth flashed, its fangs longer than her fingers. Its eyes burned. Koyee raised her spear, but the beast knocked the blade aside with its paw.

The wolf thudded against her, its weight knocking her down, and its claws swiped again. Pain blazed across her face, tearing her flesh, and blood filled her eyes, and she choked and—

Her eyes snapped open.

A beast stared down upon her. It was no longer a wolf but a sickly man, his skin covered in warts, his scraggly hair dangling

like cobwebs. Purple splotches stained his single, crooked tooth, telling of years smoking *hintan*, the spice of deep caves. Koyee sputtered, unable to breathe, and realized that the man was choking her, his hands around her neck.

"You've got a nice sword on your back," the man hissed, saliva dripping down his chin. "Aye, it'll belong to Snaggletooth, little girl. Old Snaggletooth needs a sword. Swords can buy sweet sweet sweet spice so wonderful."

She couldn't even scream.

Koyee kicked wildly, but her legs only found air. She punched, driving her fist into the man's face. Blood spurted from his lip, but he only laughed. His fingers tightened around her neck, and darkness spread across Koyee. Stars floated before her eyes.

How had this happened? She had only been in Pahmey for an hourglass turn or two. She had only found an alley to sleep in. And now . . . did her journey now end so soon?

She could no longer see her assailant, no longer feel pain. Her spirit began to rise.

She floated above this alley, above the crystal city, above all of Eloria. The dark plains and mountains spread for miles. In the west the sunfire burned, the light of Timandra, the realm of evil, and she saw him again.

The sunlit demon. One eye green, one black. A creature wheeling the bones of her father.

She had to stop him. She had to save her home.

I cannot die here in the shadows.

Blinded, she drove her fist with all her strength.

Her knuckles connected with something hard. Pain shot down her arm. The grip on her throat loosened.

Koyee gasped for breath. Foul, fetid air entered her lungs, tasting of rotted meat, but it was the sweetest breath she'd ever taken. The darkness pulled back, and moonlight again filled the

alley, illuminating the withered creature with wisps of hair. The man wore only rags and his toenails spread out, yellow and curved. He hissed, blood on his nose.

"Your sword will be Snaggletooth's!" He lunged toward her again. "Snaggletooth needs to buy his spice."

Koyee leaped to her feet and jumped sideways. The man lunged past her and hit the wall.

With a single, fluid movement, Koyee drew her father's sword and swung the blade.

The folded steel sliced into Snaggletooth's shoulder, spraying blood.

He screamed and glared. He clutched his wound, and blood dripped between his fingers. He bared his single, spice-stained tooth and looked ready to pounce again, then whimpered. Blood dripping, Snaggletooth scurried out of the alley, disappearing into the labyrinth of the city.

With the immediate danger gone, Koyee allowed herself to tremble. She took deep, ragged breaths, her throat burning. She had to lean against the alley wall, the glass bricks cold against her back.

"Eelani, are you all right?" she whispered, and her heart thudded. Had her assailant scared off her dearest friend, her invisible shoulder spirit? When she felt the familiar warmth on her shoulder, Koyee breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank the moon you're all right," Koyee said and shuddered.

She had fought nightwolves; her face still bore the scars. Yet she had never known fellow Elorians to attack. Nobody in Oshy, her peaceful village, had ever assaulted another villager.

"It seems we'll have to be careful here in the big city, Eelani." Koyee's fingers still trembled. "We can't just sleep alone in dark alleys anymore."

It was long moments before her heart slowed, her breath calmed, and her trembling eased. She was still alive. She was still here in Pahmey, seeking aid for her village, hungry and thirsty and cold.

"How long have we slept, Eelani?"

She knelt and lifted her hourglass. It had fallen over in the fight, but luckily had not shattered. Koyee stuffed it into her pocket.

With the fear of battle gone, her belly gave a growl. Her throat still ached from her assailant's grip, but it burned with thirst too. She had not eaten or drunk since entering the city.

She rummaged through her pockets, seeking something—anything—to eat, even only crumbs. Yet she had nothing left, and she had given her only coin to the city guards. Her fingers brushed against something soft, and she pulled out the blue ribbon she had taken from Minlao Palace.

"Come along, Eelani, let's go back to that tower. Maybe it'll be less busy. Maybe those guards will finally let us see the elders."

Ignoring the rumblings of her belly, she tottered out the alley and into the main street. Sparks fluttered in the breeze and heat bathed Koyee. She rounded a corner and saw a great public fireplace where two boulevards met. Flames crackled within a ring of polished stone, burning ten feet tall. An ornate grill contained the fire, its iron shaped as coiling serpents, flying bats, leaping fish, and dancing women. Children gathered upon the hearthstones, holding out their hands for warmth. Soldiers guarded this towering monument of stone, iron, and light, for fire meant life in the darkness of endless night.

Koyee stared into the flames for a while, remembering her small brazier back in Oshy, then kept walking with a smile. People bustled around her, their silks swishing, their sandals clattering. Four men walked down the road, bearing a palanquin of gilded bones; a corpulent man sat atop, smoking a hookah of *hintan*. An

elderly woman shouted curses at him, riding a wingless blue bird that stood ten feet tall, its neck long and thin, its beak silvery.

With her humble fur tunic, bare feet, and empty pockets, Koyee again felt very common here, a fisherman's daughter in the big city. Most everyone else wore jewels or face paint. With her scarred face, Koyee felt homelier than ever.

"But we have no time to worry about that, Eelani, so stop it," she said. "Come along, faster now."

She moved through the crowd, heading back toward Minlao Palace, which rose in the city center. Again its height spun her head. When she craned her neck back, she could just make out the city elders walking inside the tower's dome, hundreds—maybe a thousand—feet above. They seemed smaller than bats against the moon.

When Koyee reached the palace gates, she waved the blue ribbon at the guards.

"I'm back. Koyee Mai of Oshy. May I see the elders now?"

Clad in their white robes, the guards smiled stoically, holding their halberds. Their chief opened his scroll; it rolled down to his feet.

"Koyee Mai of Oshy," he said pleasantly. "You are now four hundred and seventieth in line to see the city elders. Please feel free to explore the city of Pahmey and return when your time is closer."

Koyee tugged her hair in frustration. "But I've been away for an entire hourglass turn! And I've only moved three places in line?"

The guard gave her an amiable smile. "Thank you for waiting. The wise elders will be happy to see you when your ribbon is called. We estimate another forty-six turns of a standard hourglass. Thank you and may the moonlight bless you."

Koyee walked away, hunched over and grumbling. Her belly grumbled just as loudly.

"Damn those guards, and damn those city elders," she said. "We won't last another forty-odd hourglass turns on an empty belly, Eelani. I know you're hungry. Let's find some food."

As she wandered down the street, Koyee considered her options.

"We can return to the river and fish. We still have a net on our boat. But how would we get back into the city? I don't think the guards would take fish as payment." Eelani brushed against her cheek and Koyee sighed. "No, Eelani, we couldn't sell our fish on the docks and earn our coin back. Don't you remember? The guards were scattering anyone who tried to sell wares outside the walls." Eelani gave a tiny, almost imperceptible tug to her hair. "Why? Why do you think? The city wants more coins. If everyone sold wares outside the walls, nobody would pay their tolls. I know you miss our boat, Eelani, but we can't leave the city. We'll have to find food in here somewhere . . . somehow."

She made her way back south, moving down twisting streets between the towers.

"Let's find the market again," she said. "Perhaps in the bustle we can grab fallen food. If we dust it off, it'll serve for now. I wish we had something to sell, but all we have is my fur tunic and my father's sword, and I won't sell either one." She smiled wryly. "I'd sell you, little friend, if anyone believed you existed."

Small feet hopped upon her shoulder in protest.

Koyee could not remember the way back to the market. All of Pahmey seemed built upon a hill, the towers rising from its peak. The streets coiled and twisted in a labyrinth, but they all sloped downward. Koyee navigated by the moon whenever she saw it peek beyond the roofs.

Her feet ached, and she must have walked for miles before she finally saw the market again. Awnings stretched out from glass walls like wings. Beneath them, along the cobbled streets,

countless merchants sat upon rugs, peddling their wares from tin dishes, stone carts, and baskets woven of bones.

The scents of food—mushrooms, truffles, dried meats, and fish of all kinds—tickled her nostrils. Her belly gave a plaintive growl, and her throat burned. Koyee licked her dry lips with an equally dry tongue. She needed food and water soon, or she would be too weak to keep wandering this city.

"Thirst can kill us just as much as alley spicers," she said to her invisible friend.

She wandered through the market. All around her, the merchants cried out their wares. Shouts of "Fresh clams!" and "Matsutake wine!" and "Tin and iron, we buy and sell!" rang in her ears. An old woman leaped in front her, waving a blue lacquerware jug, chanting its price. "Only five coppers, only five coppers." A man hopped at her side, brandishing a cage holding an albino snake. "Good pet, good pet, thirty coppers, buy him!"

Koyee waved these merchants aside and trudged between several more. She kept scanning the floor, hoping to find a fallen truffle, an escaped crab, or even fish bones to gnaw on. Her belly was so tight that she wasn't picky. Even a puddle would serve to fill that belly now.

She walked by a vendor who sat on a fur rug, and delicious scents flowed through Koyee like spirits. In a dozen tin dishes, the man sold foods of all kinds: dried seahorses, spicy lanternfish, a dozen types of mushrooms, salted snakes, and even spiders on skewers. Koyee felt her mouth watering.

"Yes, girl, buy some!" the merchant said.

Her stomach gave such a loud growl, Koyee felt her cheeks flush.

An old man hobbled in front of her, hefted some chanterelle mushrooms, and began to haggle. The merchant raised his hands in dismay, arguing about the price.

He's looking away from me, Koyee thought, and her heart burst into a gallop. Did she dare . . . truly? To steal?

No. She could not. She was the daughter of a noble warrior; she was no thief!

"I'm not paying more than a single copper for these," said the old man, gesturing at the mushrooms. He sniffed one and wrinkled his face. "These are no good."

The merchant groaned. "You are crazy, old man, these are the finest chanterelles in Pahmey. Look how plump and yellow they are. It's two coppers for a stone."

The old man placed a bunch of mushrooms on a scale. "I'll pay one copper or I'll take my business to Old Periwan. His prices are fair."

The merchant slapped the scale, sending a mushroom tumbling to the ground.

"Old Periwan sells dust and stones! You buy these. Great delicacy. I sell you them for a copper and a tin. You buy?"

The mushroom rolled across the cobblestones to Koyee's feet.

She stared at it, her mouth watering. The merchant and old man were still arguing, paying her no heed.

It's not really stealing if it rolled to my feet, she told herself, her arms weak with hunger. She took a deep breath, steeling herself. She leaned down, lifted the chanterelle, and began to back away.

She had taken three steps, her prize in her hand, when the merchant called out toward her.

"Girl! You, girl, in the white fur. You going to pay for that, my friend?"

Koyee knew she should return the mushroom, but her hunger thought on its own. She spun and began fleeing through the crowd, clutching her morsel.

"Girl!" the merchant shouted behind. "Stars damn you. Stop her! Stop the urchin."

Koyee forced herself to slow down. If she ran, she would reveal her guilt. The people crowded around her, and she wormed her way between them. Her heart pounded, but she forced herself to wander calmly, to pretend to be shopping leisurely. She moved farther and farther down the street, knowing the merchant could not follow her, not without abandoning his wares to other thieves.

So I'm a thief, she thought and shame flooded her.

But her hunger was greater. She kept walking until the merchant's calls faded behind.

Then, in the most joyous moment of her life, she brought the mushroom to her lips. She bit deep.

Earthy flavors exploded through her mouth, tasting of meat, smoke, and a hint of sweetness. Koyee closed her eyes and moaned. The heartiness flowed through her, from her tongue down to her toes. She bit again, savoring the juices that filled her mouth. With a third bite, the mushroom was gone. She sighed and opened her eyes.

"I want more, Eelani," she said. "This is like hunting on the plains. It's a different game with different dangers, but it's still hunting."

She kept walking through the market, her hunger only intensifying with the lingering taste of mushroom. Down a few more twisting streets, these ones selling beads and scrolls and slippers, she came to a road rich with the scents of seafood. Under green awnings, stalls displayed the spoils of the river.

Koyee entered the corridor, hoping to collect more fallen nibbles. Shoppers moved around her, carrying tin baskets, haggling and filling their receptacles with feasts. Koyee approached a stall built of bones, tendons, and leather, its shelves displaying an array of live crabs. She dared to hope one of the critters would fall off and race toward her.

A shadow darted at her side. A small figure bumped into her, then raced on.

Koyee had barely taken another step when the shadow reached the stall of crabs, grabbed one of the animals, and darted off into the distance. Koyee caught but a glimpse of the thief—a little girl with a mousy face, her two front teeth missing.

Koyee gasped. The crab-merchant cursed, whipped around the stall, and began shouting and pointing at the fleeing pilferer.

"Stop that child! Stop her!"

When Koyee glanced back at the stall, hoping to find an escaped crab, her eyes widened.

Three other children crept toward the stall, cloaked in gray, and began stuffing crabs into sacks. The merchant was still shouting and pointing toward the fleeing girl, several steps away from his wares.

Koyee could not afford to hesitate. She slunk forward and reached for a crab.

"No!" whispered one of the children, eyes wide in gaunt cheeks. A scar ran down his temple, and he was missing one ear. "Not for you."

The boy looked up, grimaced, and motioned to his friends. They retreated from the stall, slinking into an alleyway.

Koyee glanced up to see the merchant returning. Quick as a striking snake, she grabbed a crab and scurried back.

"Thieves!" The merchant's eyes widened. "Urchins everywhere. Robbers!"

He reached for a cleaver. Koyee didn't wait to see him wield it.

She raced into the alleyway, following the one-eared boy. She glimpsed him vanishing around a barrel and followed. She rounded a corner, saw an open doorway, and darted inside. Ahead, past shelves of fabrics, several shadows scurried out a second door, heading into another alleyway.

"Thieves!" cried a voice behind.

Koyee ran behind the fleeing children, her breath ragged. The crab snapped its claws in her hand. Finally, in a dusty alley full of old women weaving silks, she paused and caught her breath.

The sounds of pursuit had faded. Koyee stood for long moments, panting. Her head spun and her knees would not stop trembling; whether from fear, hunger, or thirst, she didn't know.

"We made it, Eelani," she said and took a shaky breath. "We're safe."

Before she could take another breath, a hand reached out and plucked the crab straight from her grasp.

"Hey!" Koyee cried, spun sideways, and saw the one-eared boy vanishing with her prize.

She chased him, shaking her fist.

"That's mine!" she said.

He scampered away. Several other shadows darted at his side, mere ghosts in the night. But Koyee was a huntress; she had spent her youth stalking beasts on the stone plains. The soft city folk could not catch these children, but she followed them doggedly, racing through alleys, doorways, and crowded streets.

The children reached a wall of glass bricks, and Koyee grinned savagely, sure that she had trapped them. But they only scampered up the wall, moving as quickly as spiders, and leaped onto the roof.

Cursing, she chased them. She placed her hands against the wall, seeking purchase between the bricks, and began to climb. The ascent was more difficult than she'd expected. Koyee grumbled. Her feet scuffled against the wall, seeking cracks for her toes. Her sword swung across her back. She climbed a few more bricks and almost slipped, but her hunger drove her onward. She feared that hunger more than falling.

She reached the roof, grabbed a tile, and tugged herself up with a grimace.

The tile came free.

Koyee yelped and, for an instant, she fell through open air.

A hand reached out, grabbed her wrist, and stopped her fall.

"You clumsy fool!" said the one-eared boy above. "What kind of thief are you? Is it worth dying for a crab?"

He pulled her, straining against her weight. Koyee gasped for air, head spinning. She grabbed the roof again and pulled herself onto the tiles. She leaned over, dizzy, and breathed raggedly.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I . . ."

Before she could complete her sentence, the boy darted away again. He jumped off the roof, landed on an awning, and scampered into the shadows below. Koyee stumbled along the roof, leaned across the other side, and beheld a graveyard nestled between old warehouses. A shadow scuttled among the tombstones—the boy with her crab.

Koyee paused and sucked in her breath. She had always feared graveyards; while she had never seen a ghost herself, her brother used to scare her with their stories, and that fear lingered. This graveyard seemed even stranger than the one in Oshy. Its tombstones tilted, craggy and twisted like old men of stone. Wisps fluttered between them and wails rose, metallic and echoing—the cries of the world beyond.

Koyee ground her teeth, forcing down her fear. "If I don't get my meal back, I'll become a ghost myself."

She took a deep breath and tightened her lips. Wincing, she leaped off the roof and thudded against the awning. She rolled off and slammed onto the ground. Her breath left her lungs with a short "Oof!"

She pushed herself up, groaning, and wobbled forward. Her head spun and her legs shook. She could not keep this up for long. She would have returned to the market and tried to steal

again, but she no longer knew her location. She was fully, utterly lost.

She stumbled into the graveyard and wandered among its tombstones. No lanterns shone here. Only the stars lit this place, and even Koyee's eyes—sharper than most—could barely pierce the darkness. The wails rose louder here, and the wisps fluttered across her face. Cold sweat covered Koyee and she shivered, but then she tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

"Wind chimes," she said, staring up at them. "Wind chimes and silk scarves. Fake ghosts." She raised her voice. "Where are you, thief? Speak to me."

The tombstones rose around her, tall and narrow as men. The rune of Qaelin, a moon within a star, gleamed upon them. Wind whistled, mist swirled, and an owl hooted.

The thief was gone.

Koyee let out a long breath, and her eyes dampened. She was lost. She was cold. She was so hungry she could think of nothing else. Her quest seemed hopeless, and she slumped down onto her backside, leaned against a tombstone, and sighed.

"What do we do now, Eelani?" she whispered. "I feel like we've failed our village."

Her invisible friend nuzzled against her cheek, a hint of warmth like the breath of a loving pet.

A voice spoke ahead, startling her.

"You're quick. What gang are you?"

Koyee opened her eyes to see the one-eared boy regarding her. She leaped to her feet, drew her sword, and pointed the blade at him. He couldn't have been older than ten or eleven. At sixteen and a full five feet tall, Koyee towered over him.

"Return my crab," she said.

He shook his head. "We created the distraction. You fed on our turf. What gang are you?"

Three more children stepped from behind tombstones, joining the one-eared boy. One was the mousy girl with the missing teeth; she looked no older than five or six. Her knees were skinned, her eyes were afraid, and she still clutched a sack of live crabs. Two other children were tall, dour twins with shaved heads, almost old enough to be called youths. One held a club and the other a knife. They stepped toward her, and Koyee spun from side to side, slicing the air with her sword.

"Stay back!" she said.

But the one-eared boy took a step closer.

"You entered our domain, and now you will answer to us," he said. "I am Earwig. We are the Dust Face Ghosts. What gang are you?" He spat. "Black Snakes? The Stone Brothers? Who?"

She glared, pointing her sword from one child to another. They all wore rags and dirt smeared their faces. Scrapes and scars covered their bodies.

"I don't belong to any gang," Koyee said, not bothering to mask her disgust. "Now share those crabs with me, or I'll slice you to ribbons."

The mousy girl, the smallest of the bunch, whimpered and stepped back, tears filling her eyes. The twins, however, growled and stepped closer, raising their weapons; they were younger than Koyee, but taller and wider. She growled back, sword raised.

"Well then," Koyee said, smiling crookedly, "who wants to taste this steel first?"

Her heart thudded. She had never felt this angry, this violent, but her stomach needed that food, and she was willing to fight for it. The thieves stepped closer and Koyee steeled herself for battle.

A loud voice rose from the shadows.

"Clubhand! Sharpstone! Step back and lower your weapons." A shadow stirred behind a tombstone. "Whisper, give her a crab. One of them is hers."

The thieves muttered, one of them spat, and another tossed down his club with a curse. The mousy girl—Whisper—shivered and opened the sack. She tossed a crab toward Koyee, daring not step closer. Koyee caught it with one hand.

"Who's back there?" Koyee said, speaking to the shadows. "Do you lead these children? Come face me."

The mist parted. A young woman emerged from around a tombstone, her white hair woven into a hundred braids. Clad in a tunic of patches, she was missing her left arm, and scars ran along her left thigh. In her right hand, she held a spear, and daggers hung from her belt.

"I am Longarm. We are the Dust Face Ghosts, and you are alone." The young woman stepped closer, her eyes narrowed, and she tilted her head. "The scars on your face. Did you earn them in battle?"

Koyee stiffened. She didn't like people staring at her scars, let alone discussing them, but then again—everyone here had scars of their own. She growled at Longarm.

"I battled a nightwolf. I slew him, but not before he gave me these. I now wear his fur as my tunic."

Longarm placed a finger under Koyee's chin, raised her head, and turned her cheek into the moonlight. She nodded in approval.

"I will name you Halfsmile," she said, "for your scar raises your lips in a smirk."

Koyee bared her teeth. "I have a real name. I am—"

"You are Halfsmile," Longarm said. "We have no real names here. You will be one of us. You are fast and brave, and you carry sharp steel. We need more fighters." She gestured at the younger children. "These ones are sneaky and fast, but only the twins and I know how to fight." She turned toward Whisper. "Start a fire! Cook these crabs. Halfsmile will eat with us."

The last thing Koyee wanted was to remain in a graveyard, surrounded by thieves. The first thing she wanted was to eat. Hunger overcame her fear, and soon Koyee found herself sitting by a campfire, filthy thieves around her, eating boiled crabs and drinking icy water.

"I'm not one of you," she mumbled through a mouthful of crab meat. "So stop calling me Halfsmile."

But the children only reached out, touched the scar raising the corner of her mouth, and laughed.

"Halfsmile, Halfsmile!" they said. "Welcome to the Dust Face Ghosts."

Koyee swallowed and sighed. She decided to stay for only a while longer, only until the city elders agreed to see her. She ate among the graves, her sword across her back, and thought of home.

Had more Timandrians emerged from the dusk? Were her fellow villagers safe? Oshy seemed so far away, a different world, and the old Koyee—the fisherman's daughter—seemed a different person.

I miss you, Oshy, she thought. *I miss you, Father.*

She reached for another crab, huddled closer to the others for warmth, and let nothing but thoughts of food and fire fill her mind.

CHAPTER EIGHT
CLOAKS AND ARROWS

Torin was standing on the Watchtower when trees creaked below, howls rose, and robed figures burst out from the dusk.

His heart leaped into a gallop, and he fumbled for his bow and arrows. He cursed as the bow slipped from his fingers to clatter against the battlements. The yelps rose below, wordless battle cries, the sound of rabid dogs. Fingers shaking, Torin lifted his bow, pulled an arrow from his quiver, and nocked it. He leaned across the battlements, aiming his arrow below.

The four figures raced from the shadowy trees, heading toward Fairwool-by-Night. They wore black robes, and hoods hid their faces. Each man held a bow with a flaming arrow, and swords swung upon their hips. They shouted as they ran, clearing the trees and racing across a rye field toward the village.

"Elorian soldiers," Torin whispered. It was as he'd feared. They wanted revenge for their burnt brother.

Torin closed one eye, aimed at a man, and fired.

His arrow whistled down, flew by an Elorian, and slammed into the earth.

Torin cursed. As he drew a second arrow, he shouted down the tower.

"Bailey! Bailey, where are you? Elorians attack!"

He fired another arrow, missed again, and growled. The Elorians were only heartbeats away from the village now. Torin spun toward the western merlons. Fairwool-by-Night lay in the valley below. A few villagers had heard the shouts; they emerged from their cottages and looked around, confused.

"Elorians attack!" Torin shouted. "Village Guard—to the rye field!"

He spun back toward the field; it lay south of him between the tower and the river. The four Elorians, clad in their black robes, stood among the rye stalks. They tugged back their bowstrings, aiming their flaming arrows.

They fired.

Torin cursed and shot his own arrow.

His missile flew true. It slammed into the chest of an Elorian below, but then clattered to the ground. The man hissed and remained standing; he must have been wearing armor under his robes.

Panting, Torin followed the path of the flaming arrows. The projectiles flew toward the village. Two clattered down into the empty square. The others hit a cottage roof, and the thatch caught fire.

"Village Guard!" Torin shouted, nocking another arrow.

He saw Bailey racing through the village below, drawing her sword and heading toward the field. She shouted battle cries and her braids swung madly. Slim Cam and beefy Hem emerged from the Shadowed Firkin, the village tavern. They held mugs of ale, and Hem was still chewing a turkey leg.

"Boys, to the rye field!" Torin shouted from above, waving madly. "Elorians!"

He turned to fire another arrow. The Elorians were racing forward again, heading toward the village. Bailey was still running toward them, screaming and brandishing her sword.

Torin froze. With his aim, he was as likely to hit Bailey as the Elorians. He yowled in frustration, tossed down his bow and arrows, and began racing down the tower stairwell.

At once he regretted it. He should have stayed upon the battlements, waiting for a better shot. That would've been the wiser action, the one his father would've taken. But clanking down

the stairwell, his sword thumping against his thigh, he dared not turn back. Bailey was running alone to attack four armed demons; he had to fight at her side, wise or not.

He reached the ground level, burst out of the tower, and raced down Watcher's Hill. His boots tore up grass and his heart thudded. Smoke rose from the village below; two more cottages were burning. Ahead in the field, Bailey was already clashing swords with the Elorians. She was fighting two at once; Torin no longer saw the other two.

Running as fast as he could, Torin drew his sword. His boot slammed into a rock. He nearly slipped and impaled himself, but managed to keep running, moving downhill and into the field. The sprouting rye, still green and short, bobbed up and down around him.

He raced toward the melee. Blood was dripping down Bailey's thigh. She spun in circles, swinging her sword, holding the two Elorians back. The robed creatures had dropped their bows and were lunging with swords.

Heart in his mouth, Torin reached the battle and swung his sword.

A hooded figure spun toward him. A blade thrust. Torin clenched his teeth and parried. The two swords clanged together.

Torin was no swordsman. He was only a gardener; he didn't know how to swing this blade. He fought with pure instinct, driving his blade down. The Elorian parried. Light pierced its hood, revealing a pewter mask, perhaps built to protect its pale skin from the Timandrian sunlight. Their blades clashed again. Bailey fought ahead, grunting as she swung her sword, her blood trailing down her thigh.

High-pitched yowls rose from the village.

With a hiss, the creature Torin dueled stepped back. He glared at Torin through his mask's eye-holes, then raced around him, heading toward the cottages.

Torin stood panting, torn between chasing the Elorian and helping Bailey. He chose Bailey. He stepped toward her, ready to fight with her, only to see her standing over a corpse. She tugged her sword from the fallen Elorian; it came free slick with blood. More blood dripped down her leg.

Merciful Idar, he thought, for a moment frozen, only able to stare. *She killed a man.* He wasn't sure when the Elorian had ceased being a *creature* and became a *man*—perhaps only when it lay dead in blood.

Torin met Bailey's eyes and saw the same horror in them. She stared back for only an instant, but that instant seemed to last for years, and it spoke of countless nightmares.

"Bailey, you're hurt," he said, wincing at the sight of her blood.

She spat into the rye. "I'm fine. After him!"

She began to run in pursuit of the Elorian whom Torin had dueled. Torin joined her, arms pumping. His side ached, and his breath blazed in his lungs. The Elorian was racing across the field, heading toward the cottages. Five roofs now blazed, maybe more, and black smoke curled skyward. Screams rose from the village. Torin ran as fast as he could, but the Elorian and Bailey were faster, and soon he was trailing behind.

When he finally crossed the fields and burst into the village, he entered a world of smoke, blood, and fire.

Villagers ran screaming. Old Wela, the brewer's doughy and dark-haired wife, clutched a gash on her belly, blood leaking between her fingers. Finian the tinsmith, a kindly man who had often played dice with Torin, ran in flames, a living torch. Torin's head spun. He could barely see a dozen feet in any direction; the smoke was too thick, swirling everywhere. He stumbled between the cottages. He could no longer see Bailey.

"Bailey!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

Two red-haired women emerged from the smoke ahead, wearing aprons—Mae and Yara Hearthstone, twin cooks at the village tavern. Mae held a rolling pin, while her sister still held a half-plucked chicken. Welts rose across their arms, and they coughed in the smoke. Torin headed toward them when a black figure leaped. A robed Elorian swept across the street, and a blade lashed. Yara Hearthstone fell, green eyes wide, her chest gushing blood. The Elorian swung his blade again, tearing into Mae, driving his sword into her belly. She too fell and her rolling pin rolled down a bloodied street.

Torin felt like gagging, trembling, fainting, or all three together, but he forced himself to run. He swung his sword, racing toward the Elorian. The cloaked figure retreated into the smoke.

"Come face me, coward!" he shouted. He ran into the smoke and coughed madly. He waved his hand, trying to clear it. His eyes and throat burned.

Cursing, he dropped to his hands and knees. He crawled along the ground—the smoke was thinner here—and emerged from the inferno by the village temple.

He straightened and looked around, still coughing. Sparks covered his clothes. Cam and Hem stood ahead, looking around, bewildered. Blood dripped down Cam's arm, while Hem trembled wildly.

"Boys!" Torin said. "We have to find the Elorians. Three are still alive. Have you seen Bailey?"

They shook their heads, faces sooty and eyes wide.

A shadow moved at the corner of Torin's eye.

He spun to see black robes flutter behind a house.

He ran in pursuit.

"Boys, with me!" he shouted.

He raced around the house, only to see the Elorian disappear behind bales of hay. An instant later, the bales burst into flame.

Cursing and wheezing, belly twisting with worry for his friends, Torin ran around the blaze. He skirted the fire to see the Elorian aiming a flaming arrow at him.

Torin leaped aside.

The arrow flew.

Pain slammed into Torin's chest. A bolt drove into his breastplate, denting the steel.

He fell to his knees.

A second arrow whistled. It felt like a giant punching his chest. Torin gasped and fell to his side. Burning hay rained onto him, and smoke blinded his eyes. He couldn't breathe.

A shadow fell. Torin looked up, seeing only smudges. Two figures leaped above him, one slim and small, the other large as an ox. The shadows roared and swung blades.

"Cam and Hem," Torin whispered, voice hoarse. Smoke invaded his mouth and burned down his lungs.

His eyes rolled back.

Torin found himself floating through smoke, darkness, and memory.

Night glided around him.

The moon and stars shone.

Again he saw her, the Elorian girl with silvery hair, her eyes as large as chicken eggs, her skin white as milk.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't want your father to die. I'm sorry."

Somehow in his dream, he *knew* the fallen Elorian was her father; he could see a mourning daughter's pain in her eyes.

But she only fled from him, disappearing into the shadows of the night, leaving him alone with the bones, alone with his shame, alone with the agony driving through his chest.

He coughed.

Hands touched his forehead and he jerked.

"Torin?"

The voice was soft and warm. He blinked, reaching out into the shadows, seeking the Elorian girl.

"Torin! Merciful Idar, stop grabbing at me."

He opened his eyes to see Bailey glaring down at him, and he realized he was pawing at her clothes. He blinked, looked around him, and found himself lying in his bed. He recognized the clay walls, wide hearth, and wooden floor of Lord Kerof's manor, the place where Torin had lived since losing his parents.

He leaped up in bed, but his head spun and he fell back.

"Bails," he said, voice hoarse. "The Elorians. The battle—"

"—is over," Bailey said. "The Elorians fled. You got knocked around too much and took a nap under a burning bale of hay. Cam and Hem dragged you here before you burned into a piece of toast."

Wincing, he pushed himself onto his elbows and examined his foster sister. A bandage wrapped around her thigh, and a welt marred her arm. Her braids ended with singed hair. She seemed otherwise unharmed, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He looked down at his own body next. Somebody had removed his armor and tunic, and two bandages clung to his chest. Welts covered his arms and hands.

"I took two arrows to the chest and survived," he said, not without wonder.

Bailey snorted. "Oh, Winky. You were wearing a breastplate. The arrows only dented the steel and scratched you a bit. Don't be acting like a hero." She smiled crookedly, kissed his cheek, and mussed his hair. "You're still just a baby face."

Grumbling, he sat upright, twisted around, and placed both feet on the floor.

"The village," he said. "How bad is it?"

Bailey's face darkened. She lowered her eyes.

"Bad. Fifteen people are dead. Five houses burned to the ground." She twisted her fingers. "The only Elorian who died is the one I slew. The three others fled, taking the body of their comrade with them. At least . . ." Her voice dropped. "At least, Elorians on the *surface*. Torin, I think this was all fake."

He rose to his feet, wobbled, and sat back down on the bed.

"Fake? Bailey, we're both banged up and bandaged. Five houses burned." His eyes stung. "Fifteen people died. What do you mean 'fake'?"

She bared her teeth and gripped his shoulders. "I mean those weren't real Elorians! You saw the Elorian that burned on the pyre. He didn't wear a black cloak or a mask. He didn't wield a doubled-edged sword, but a curved blade."

Torin managed to push himself upright. He tried to walk forward, but Bailey stood in his way. Taller than him, her feet planted firmly on the ground, she wasn't moving anywhere.

"The last Elorian was dragged here," he said. "Of course he wouldn't be wearing robes and a mask. These ones didn't want the sun to burn them. Bails! They spend their life in darkness; the last one's skin was turning all red before Ferius burned him."

"And where was Ferius during the battle?" she said. "Where were his three monks? Nobody saw them. Four monks were missing . . . and four robed figures attacked us." She dug her fingernails into her shoulders. "I say *they* did this—the Sailith monks."

Torin sighed. He placed his hands on Bailey's waist, trying to move her aside, but she wouldn't budge.

"Bailey, I hate Ferius too. But damn it, even he wouldn't stoop that low. To don a disguise and massacre fifteen people? For what?"

She shoved him so hard he fell back onto the bed.

"You know for what!" She placed her hands on her hips. "He hates Elorians more than anything. So he framed them. He probably murdered Yana too. The man wants to start a war. Don't you get it? He wants the king to invade Eloria with armies. He wants to see all of Eloria burn. That's all he cares about."

Torin froze, considering. He thought back to the Elorian burned at the pyre. He remembered the Elorian girl peering at him from behind a boulder. They had not seemed cruel, but then again, Ferius had slain one of their own. Wouldn't the other nightfolk want revenge? Torin didn't know what to believe.

Before he could formulate a reply, the door banged open. Red-faced and huffing, Cam and Hem burst into the house.

Soot still filled their hair, and bandages patched a dozen wounds across them. Wheezing for breath, Hem had his arm in a sling. Cam was limping and leaning against his shepherd's crook.

"Bailey, the snake's at it again!" Cam said, cheeks flushed. The young shepherd coughed and wiped soot off his brow. "He's ranting about Eloria more than ever, and I think he's up to—" Cam froze, stared at Torin, and his eyes widened. "Torin, old boy! You're awake. Did you enjoy your nap?"

Twice his friend's size, Hem grinned. "Torin! By Idar, I thought you were dead when I saw those arrows slam into you."

Cam rolled his eyes. "The arrows were harmless. *You* almost killed him, jumping over him like that. Imagine you landed on him, a boy your size; you'd have crushed him like an ant."

The larger boy growled. "I saved his life. Careful that I don't crush *you*. You're about the size of an ant."

Cam glowered and shoved Hem, who shoved back, and soon the two were slapping at each other, grumbling and cursing. It took Bailey to step between them, place her hands on their chests, and shove them apart.

"You two can bicker like an old married couple later," the young woman said. "Right now, save your strength for battling Ferius, not each other."

She grabbed their ears and twisted. The two boys yowled, bent over, and winced. Bailey dragged them toward the door as they mewled, tugging their ears like leashes.

With a sigh, Torin stepped out of bed, pulled a tunic over his head, and followed. The four friends, the only members of the Village Guard, stepped out the door and into the sunlight.

When Torin beheld the village, his chest deflated and his lungs blazed anew.

It looked even worse than he'd expected. Several houses had burned to the ground; nothing remained but clay shells, charred furniture within. Their gardens, which Torin had lovingly grown over a span of years, had turned to ash. The maple tree still stood, but its leaves had burned off and soot covered its trunk; Torin doubted it would ever sprout again. Blood still coated the cobblestones of the village square. A charred robin's nest lay upon the ground, the eggs inside smashed.

"By Idar," Torin whispered.

Bailey placed a hand on his shoulder. "You slept during the funerals; you were hurt and we couldn't wake you." Her eyes hardened, her cheeks flushed, and her fingers tightened around his shoulders. "Ferius buried them in his temple graveyard. Fifteen bodies. Most of them were Idarith, not followers of his twisted order, and yet he took their bones and claimed their souls."

Queasy, Torin took a few steps farther into the village square. Past the charred maple, he turned to see the Sailith temple. Aside from the Watchtower upon the hill, the temple was the only building in Fairwool-by-Night built of stone, and it had survived the flames. Outside its gates stood the statue of a noble Timandrian crushing a twisted Elorian. Behind the sculpture,

thick with brambles, sprawled the graveyard. The fresh graves rose in mounds.

"Why did Lord Kerof allow this?" Torin whispered.

Bailey lowered her head. "Grandpapa weakens every hourglass turn, his cough deeper, his limbs thinner. I fear he no longer has the strength to resist the temple." She looked at Torin, her brown eyes haunted. "I fear that Ferius has become the true ruler of this village."

As if on cue, the monk's voice rose from within the temple, twisted with fury. Standing outside in the square, Torin couldn't make out the words, but the monk's tone sounded venomous as ever. Bile rose in Torin's throat.

"He will demand another raid," Torin said and held Bailey's hand. "He will cross the dusk again and avenge this new death, and more blood will spill."

His wounds still blazing, Torin limped across the square, heading toward the temple. The stone structure towered above the smaller houses, its steeple seeming to tilt against the gliding clouds. Still holding hands, Torin and Bailey climbed the stairs toward the temple doors.

When he stood within the archway, Torin beheld a crowded chamber. A hundred people or more filled the place, covering the stone tiles. Despite the daylight slanting through the windows, torches crackled upon the walls. At the back of the room, Ferius stood at a stone altar, arms raised, a candle in each hand. The monk's eyes were closed and he chanted prayers, vowing to bring light to the darkness, to burn the demons of the night.

Two of his monks stood silently at his sides, faces hidden in their hoods. With every prayer their leader uttered, the monks mumbled their approval.

"See, Torin?" Bailey whispered, standing beside him within the doorframe. "Only two monks here. He used to have three.

Remember the Elorian I killed?" Her voice dropped even lower. "I reckon it was a monk my sword slew, not an Elorian at all."

Ferius's words died on his lips. Across the hall, he lowered his arms and gazed toward the doorway. His eyes narrowed and he smiled thinly.

"And so," said the monk, "our brave defenders come to share the glory of the Sailith light. Have you come to beg forgiveness after cowering during the battle?"

Bailey snarled, drew half of her blade, and stepped forward. Torin grabbed her shoulder, holding her back; if she attacked Ferius now, she'd only be playing to his fiddle.

Torin took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly. "Ferius, you've brought enough death to this village. You have—"

The crowd of villagers jeered, and Ferius spoke above them, his voice twisted with laughter. "Again you blame others, Torin the Gardener, for the sins of your demon friends. The nightfolk slew many in this village while you, supposed guardian, failed to defend us. But the Sailith Order will defend Timandra."

Bailey gave a wordless cry, tore herself free from Torin's grasp, and elbowed her way through the crowd.

"You venomous snake!" she shouted, face flushed. "You lying worm that crawls under stones. The Elorians did not slay our villagers. *You* did. Where were you in the battle? Hidden under cloaks, I reckon, disguised as Elorians as you burned and murdered."

Silence fell over the crowd.

All eyes turned to stare at Bailey. She stood fuming, fists clenched, glaring up Ferius.

The monk placed down his candles. Yellow robes swaying, he left the altar. He moved through the crowd, villagers parting to let him pass. When he reached Bailey, he leaned so close his nose almost touched her.

"Bailey Berin," he said, voice dripping disgust. He stood several inches shorter, but with his broad shoulders, bulging brow, and beady eyes, he seemed as menacing as an enraged bull. "Beware, girl, whom you choose as your enemy. The power of Sailith is greater than you can imagine. If you are not careful, it will burn you."

Torin stomped forward, placed his hands on Ferius's chest, and pushed the man back. He had never dared lay hands on Ferius before, but seeing the monk threaten Bailey, his dearest friend, sent rage shooting through him.

"Threaten her again," Torin said, "and you'll lie buried among those you killed."

Ferius hunched over, tightened his cloak around him, and glared up at Torin. With his sallow complexion and darting tongue, he seemed less a man and more a rabid beast.

"Your father would be ashamed of you, Torin the Gardener. He defended our kingdom. He fought the enemies of Arden. You betray your own people, and you spit on his memory." As if to demonstrate, Ferius spat onto Torin's boot. "Instead of fighting the true enemies of the sun, you have made an even greater enemy, boy." Fingers twisted into claws, Ferius began trudging toward the doors. "Make way, my people! Follow me to the river."

Ferius barreled past Torin and Bailey, knocking them back, and barged out the gateway into the sunlight. The people followed in a torrent. The congregation drained out into the square. Ferius walked at their lead, heading toward the docks.

Several boats moored upon the river. A month from now, on the summer solstice, the sheep of Fairwool-by-Night would be shorn, and these boats would be loaded with wool for the capital. A month later they would return, laden with iron ore, smoked sausages, parchment, furs, lumber, and other goods the village needed. But now the boats were empty, awaiting the busy

summer. Ferius climbed into one boat, gesturing for his two monks to follow.

"People of Fairwool-by-Night!" he said. He stood in the boat, wobbling but speaking firmly. "I travel to Kingswall. I will speak with King Ceranor, my dear friend. I will return with armies!" He raised his fist. "I will bring brave men with swords and armor, true warriors, not gardeners and shepherds and bakers." He shot Torin a venomous look. "I will return with the might of Arden's hosts, and we will crush the enemy."

Silent and shadowed in their hoods, his monks untethered the boat, grabbed oars, and steered away from the docks. Once in deeper waters, the men unfurled the boat's sail. It caught the wind, propelling the vessel upriver.

"The Sailith light will protect you, friends!" Ferius called from the stern. "We will return."

Torin stood on the riverbanks, watching the boat shrink into the distance.

Cam and Hem came to stand at side, the former grumbling curses after the dwindling boat, the latter nibbling on a pickle.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," Cam said and shook his fist at the distant boat. "We'll enjoy a few days without that snake. I hope he drowns and never returns."

Hem nodded, chewing. "Me too, I—Hey!" The baker's boy whined as Cam snatched the pickle from his hand.

"I told you, don't speak with your mouth full!" Cam tossed the pickle into the water.

Shoulders slumped, Hem watched his snack float away. "You didn't have to throw it into the water." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a second pickle, and began nibbling again. "As I was saying, I'm glad Ferius is gone. Did you hear how he said you're not a real soldier, Cam? Finally we can get some peace and quiet around here. Now come on, let's go grab a pint. Tor, old boy, I'm buying yours. You deserve it."

The two boys turned toward Torin, eyes eager and mouths smacking.

Torin looked at his friends and sighed. He wanted nothing more than to sit in the Shadowed Firkin tavern and enjoy some cold ale. Hem would sing his drinking songs, his voice surprisingly mellifluous, and Cam would entertain them by juggling turnips. Bailey would sit by the fireplace, beautiful and smiling, and maybe kiss Torin's cheeks like she did sometimes after a few drinks. He sighed again. Since the plague that had swept through Fairwool-by-Night, his tavern visits had soothed him almost as much as gardening.

"I can't," he said, looking at his friends. "I have to go after Ferius."

Cam gave a choking sound, and Hem dropped his second pickle into the river. Both gaped at him, eyes wide and jaws unhinged. Only Bailey did not seem surprised. She looked at Torin sadly and nodded, understanding.

You always understood me more than anyone, Bailey, he thought, looking into her brown eyes, and his heart gave a twist. He would miss her on his journey. All his life, Bailey would mock him, dare him into trouble, and wrestle him when her temper flared. But she had also shared her roof with him for ten years, and she knew his heart, and she loved him.

"Why?" Cam sputtered. "Torin, let that weasel sail far away and forget about him. Why chase him?"

Hem nodded. "We're finally rid of him."

Torin stepped closer to his friends. "We're not rid of him for long. You heard what Ferius said. He plans to bring an army back here. He doesn't simply wish to protect our village." Torin shuddered. "He means to lead men into the night. He means to butcher Elorians in revenge." His friends paled, and Torin continued speaking, voice low. "I must travel to the capital too,

and I must speak to the king. I must stop Ferius from sparking a full-blown war."

Hem whimpered. "A war . . . Arden hasn't fought a war since . . . not since your father's days."

Torin nodded. "Yes, not since my father fought alongside the king, battling Verilon. The northerners were a cruel foe, my father said, bearded barbarians clad in furs, riding bears into battle, swinging hammers as large as plows. But as cruel as Verilon is, and as strange with its snow and pines, it's still a kingdom in Timandra. Its people are still fellow children of the light. But a war with Eloria . . ." Torin looked eastward toward the dusk; he could just see the shadows beyond the fields and trees. "This is a war that could destroy not just our village, not just our kingdom, but the world. I have to stop this."

"But how?" Cam demanded, fists clenched at his sides. The scrawny shepherd shook his head. "Ferius is a monk, and the king is, well . . . a king. You're a *gardener*. Who will listen to you?"

"The king will," Torin replied, voice soft. "My father saved his life." They stared at him silently, and Torin closed his eyes. "It was in the forests of Verilon. The king had lost almost all of his forces, just as many fallen to the cold as to the Verilish hammers. They were only a thousand left, trudging along an icy mountain, when a Verilish horde attacked. My father said there were at least ten thousand of them, burly men all in fur and iron, riding bears. Their leader, a towering man with a great yellow beard, swung a hammer at King Ceranor. My father leaped, taking the blow against his shield. The shield shattered, its shards blinding the barbarian, saving the king's life." Torin had heard the story many times as a child. He opened his eyes. "The king will listen to me, the son of his friend. Do you remember when he visited my father's funeral in Fairwool-by-Night? I was very young then, but the king will remember me. He owes my family a debt. I won't let

Ferius poison his mind. I will urge calm and we can end the bloodshed."

Bailey nodded, came to stand beside him, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"And I'm going with you," she said.

Torin shook his head forcefully. "No, Bailey. I need you to stay here and protect the village."

She snorted. "The only threat to Fairwool-by-Night just sailed upriver. You're not getting rid of me that easily, Winky. I'm going after that snake with you, and if I get a chance, I'm going to stomp him under my heel. We do this together, you and me, like we do everything." She grabbed his arm and tugged him. "Now come on—back home. You're going to pack."

As she dragged him through the village, Torin looked around at the burnt homes, fresh graves, and blood on the cobblestones. With every blink, he saw the robed figures sweeping through the village again, driving their blades into flesh. Torin swallowed, his throat tight.

If we can't stop Ferius, war will burn us all.

Bailey dragged him back into their home, tossed him a pack, and began rifling through drawers, stuffing her own pack with jars of preserves, changes of clothes, and even her old rag doll. She moved quickly, mumbling to herself, and Torin saw that her eyes were damp.

"We'll sail upriver," she said. "We'll be moving against the current, but we'll have the wind in our sail; it'll be twice as fast as walking."

Torin lifted an apple from a bowl and pocketed it. "It'll still take half a month. Merciful Idar, Bailey . . . stuck on a boat with you for half a month."

She snorted. "I've been stuck in this house with you for ten years. I'm used to it." She grabbed two wheels of cheese and

tossed him one. "I hope you pack enough food, because I know you're hopeless at fishing."

Moments later, they stood back at the docks. Green cloaks draped across their shoulders, fastened with raven pins, sigils of Arden. Cast iron pans, loaded packs, and rolled-up blankets hung across their backs, and sturdy boots held their feet. They wore breastplates over their tunics, for outlaws sometimes sailed upon the river. Their swords hung from their belts, and Bailey's bow and quiver hung among her supplies.

Their loads heavy, they walked toward their boat, a single-masted vessel named *Bailey*.

"I still think it's silly that this boat is named after you," Torin said, climbing onto the deck. "Couldn't your grandfather have given it a sensible name?"

She climbed aboard after him, rocking the boat, and twisted his arm painfully. "It's a beautiful name, and at least he didn't name it *Winky*."

They untethered the *Bailey*, filled its sail with air, and floated away from the docks. Along the riverbanks, trees rustled, grasshoppers hopped, and blackbirds sang. Cam and Hem stood waving goodbye; the latter waved while weeping into a handkerchief. Torin waved back, wondering when he'd see them again.

It was a beautiful day and his best friend was with him, but Torin's belly knotted and iciness filled his chest. He gazed at the shrinking village—smoke still rose from it—and the shadow that loomed beyond.

"Don't look back there," Bailey said and tugged his arm. "Come *on*, lazy, help me at the rudder."

He sighed and they sailed on, leaving the shadow behind.

CHAPTER NINE
A FESTIVAL OF FIRE

After only a few miles, Torin decided that he fully, completely loathed sailing.

Ferius had vanished far in the distance, and Torin felt like his progress was hardly faster than walking. The current kept trying to drag him back toward Fairwool-by-Night, and the wind filled the wrong side of his sail, just as determined to take him back home.

"Tack left, damn it!" Bailey said, standing beside him with her hands on her hips. "Don't sail into the wind, let it hit your starboard side."

Torin grumbled and tugged on the sail, struggling to adjust it. "I *am* tacking left. The current keeps pulling us the wrong way."

Bailey rolled her eyes and shoved him aside. "Let me do it. Useless gardener boys with their clumsy hands. You're only good at plucking weeds, you are."

He glared at her but let her take the sail. Grumbling, he returned to the rudder and adjusted it. With a few tugs, creaks, and curses, they managed to position their starboard side forward. Amazingly, the boat began to move against both current and wind, sailing toward the southern riverbank.

"See?" Bailey said. "It's not that hard."

"It's amazingly hard," he replied.

She groaned. "It's what these boats do every year. Boats can't just float wherever wind or water take them or they wouldn't be very useful, would they?"

Torin longingly gazed at the riverbank. "I wish we could walk. It would be easier."

"And slower." Bailey moved forward to take the rudder. "Even like this, we're sailing faster than walking. And look at those riverbanks, all thick with rushes and grass and trees. I bet there are snakes in there too."

Torin wouldn't mind trudging through the vegetation; it still seemed preferable to sailing. His hands were raw from tugging the sail ropes, and his stomach churned as the boat swayed. Along the northern riverbanks, he saw rushes, alder trees, and beyond them grassy hills strewn with boulders. Far in the distance, he could make out the green haze of forests. The wilderness of Arden lay there, the ancient kingdom of the raven, the land his father had fought for.

When Torin turned toward the southern riverbank, he saw a different land. The grasslands here flowed into a distant green and yellow haze. On the horizon, he saw hints of lush forests. Here was a land forbidden to him. The kingdom of Naya lay south of the Sern River, a realm of jungles, warriors clad in fur and leaf, and leashed tigers that fought alongside men.

"Torin, stop sightseeing and help!" Bailey said. "Idar's beard, do you want to hit the Nayan riverbank?"

Muttering under his breath, Torin helped her adjust the sail, bringing the wind against their port side. They began to sail northward, heading back toward the Ardish side of the river, a full mile away from the southern bank.

"Are we going to zigzag the whole way?" he asked. "This will take forever."

"Only until the wind turns in our direction," Bailey replied. "If both current and wind are against us, they're against Ferius too. We're moving just as fast as he is."

Torin wasn't so sure. He gazed ahead along the river, squinted, and shaded his eyes with his palm. He could see no sign of the Sailith monk. He sighed.

"If Ferius reaches Kingswall before us, he'll stir up trouble," he said. "He'll get the king to send armies downriver, and—"

Bailey shushed him and punched his arm. "We'll beat him there."

Rubbing his arm, Torin walked across the deck to check his water clock. Torin had received the timepiece—a contraption of wood, silver, and glass—for his eighteenth birthday, a gift from Lord Kerof. Water dripped from its top receptacle, a yellow glass bulb, draining into an indigo bulb. When one bulb was empty, Torin could flip the clock, letting it count time anew.

"The water measures the flow of ancient days and nights, as they turned before the world froze," Lord Kerof had said when granting him the gift last autumn. "You see, the world too once had day and night, one following the other. We worked and toiled in the sunlight, then slept in the darkness, and Timandrians and Elorians were one."

Torin had only laughed at the fanciful tale. Elorians—with their pale skin, oversized eyes, and large ears—once being the same as Timandrians? The night actually blanketing Timandra, then retreating from the sunlight, only to return a clock's turn later? It was impossible, simply a story for children. But Torin found the timepiece beautiful, a piece of art, and he often used it to track how long he went between sleeping, eating, and tending to his gardens.

"We've been sailing for a day already," he said. "And I can still see the barley fields in the east."

Bailey hopped toward him, pinched his cheek, and fled with a laugh. "It'll be a long journey, Winky. You'll be a sailor by the time we're there."

They sailed on.

The wilderness flowed at their sides, green and lush with birds, deer, and trilling frogs. The sun shone in a clear blue sky, and fish leaped in the waters.

When the clock's day bulb emptied, Torin yawned, stretched, and slept for a while upon the deck. He awoke half a bulb later, took the sail, and let Bailey sleep. Luckily by then, the wind had shifted and now blew from the northeast; he was able to adjust his sails and propel the boat faster upstream.

With the *Bailey* sailing smoothly, he stood above the living Bailey for a moment and watched her sleep. Her head lay upon her palms, and she mumbled in her slumber. When awake, Bailey was nearly intolerable, always mussing his hair, pinching his cheek, and sometimes—when he set the rudder wrong—twisting his arm. When sleeping, however, Torin could almost—almost!—find her pleasant and rather pretty. She smiled in her sleep. Her two golden braids gleamed in the sun, and freckles adorned her nose. Sometimes, like now, Torin wondered who she was to him. A foster sister? A good friend? Or maybe . . . maybe Bailey was becoming more than that, becoming a woman to love?

No. Torin shook his head forcefully. He had no use for those thoughts. Bailey was insufferable. Sooner or later, she would wake up and snort, roll her eyes, and tease him, and all the freckles and golden braids in the world wouldn't make her pleasant.

The water clock turned again, and they kept sailing.

The river curved southwest, taking them into humid, hot lands where flies bustled, mist hung in the air, and trees thickened along the Nayan riverbank.

By the fourth turn of the clock, a forest grew along the southern bank like a green wall. Torin recognized cocoa trees, redwoods, and cedars. Vines coiled around their trunks, and lichen hung from their branches. Reeds rustled along the water. Torin wanted to explore the trees—many plants he did not

recognize grew among them, and he wished to collect a few—but Bailey slapped his hand when he reached for the anchor.

"You'll have time for your exploring later," she said with a glower.

And so Torin was left with watching, his eyes wide, as the verdant forests of Naya flowed by, mist coiling between the trees. Turtles, monitor lizards, and cranes covered the riverbank, drinking from the water and watching the boat sail by. Thousands of birds of every color flocked between the trees. Once Torin saw an actual tiger moving between the branches, and the beast met his eyes before disappearing into the shadows.

A clock turn later, Torin saw a sight that drove the breath from his lungs.

"Look!" he said to Bailey and grabbed her arm.

She followed his gaze and gasped.

Along the southern riverbank, Nayan warriors stood among the trees. They wore tiger furs, and tattoos coiled across their bare chests. Their skin was pale and their hair orange and wild, and braids filled their beards. They held bows and spears, and Torin sucked in his breath, sure they would attack. With their woolen tunics and tanned skin, Torin and Bailey were clearly Ardish, folk of the northern riverbank. Would these southern warriors see them as enemies?

Hesitantly, Torin raised a hand and waved. He had seen several Nayans before, traders who sailed reed ships to Fairwool-by-Night, trading furs and herbs for iron tools. But he had never seen their warriors. They seemed even mightier than the Elorian he had fought; muscles rippled across these rainforest dwellers, and their weapons gleamed. They stared, eyes hard, saying nothing.

When their boat sailed on, leaving the Nayans behind, Torin breathed a sigh of relief. Hostilities with Eloria were bad enough; he did not relish violence within Timandra too.

"Still want to wander around those trees, looking for new plants?" Bailey said with a crooked smile.

He nodded. "I still do."

"Well, too bad, because I'm still not letting you." She stretched and yawned. "Now take the rudder. I'm going to sleep. And don't hum as you sail this time!"

He flipped his timepiece again, and they sailed on.

The water clock had drained twelve full days when they finally saw Kingswall in the distance. Torin and Bailey stood upon the prow, watching the city approach.

Torin's father had come from here, but Torin himself had never seen the city. His eyes widened at the sight, and his breath left his lungs.

"Kingswall," he said. "Capital of Arden. A bit larger than Fairwool-by-Night, isn't it, Bailey old beast?"

Walls surrounded the city, topped with dozens of turrets, their bricks pale gray. Guards in plate armor manned the walls, armed with crossbows and spears. Banners fluttered from the towers, sporting black ravens upon golden fields. Behind the walls rose hills covered with houses; their walls were built of wattle and daub like homes at Fairwool-by-Night, but here red tiles covered the roofs rather than thatch. Higher up the hill, Torin saw buildings of brick. Several temples rose here. Some were Idarith temples; their roofs were domed, the tips bearing golden semicircles, symbolizing Timandra. Others temples championed the Sailith Order; they bore steeples topped with full golden circles, calling for sunlit domination of the world.

Steering the boat closer, Torin pointed at the city. "Do you see the palace on the hilltop? The one with all the towers?"

She punched his arm. "Of course I see it. It's . . . it's . . . well, it's bloody magnificent."

Her eyes were wide, her jaw unhinged. Bailey too had spent her life in their village. The largest building there was the

Watchtower; it would have disappeared in this city of steeples and domes. The palace alone sported ten towers, their bricks white, their battlements crowned with banners.

"That's where we're going," Torin said, pointing at the castle. "That's where the king lives. I hope he remembers me." He sighed. "And I hope Ferius hasn't caused too much trouble yet. He couldn't have gotten here too long ago."

Bailey squeezed his hand. "Look, Torin! Merciful Idar, their port alone is larger than ten Fairwools. Look at the size of those ships!"

They sailed closer, the larger vessels dwarfing the humble *Bailey*. Ships sailed around them, their masts tall as towers, their sails wide. A hundred more ships swayed at a hundred piers, some only dinghies, others carracks that could hold a thousand men. Upon the docks, dockhands were unloading barrels, boxes, nets full of fish, and even wild animals in cages. Several men were turning a winch, raising a great beast off one ship; the creature was as large as ten horses, its skin gray and wrinkly, and a second tail seemed to grow from its face.

"It's an elephant," Bailey whispered and rubbed her eyes. "I saw a drawing of one once, but . . . dear me, I never knew they were so large."

Torin watched as the dockhands wheeled the elephant toward the boardwalk.

"Kind of looks like you from behind," he said.

She shoved him so hard he almost fell off the boat.

They docked the *Bailey* and then walked along the boardwalk, legs rubbery. After so long on the water, the world still seemed to sway. Once they reached the city gates, Torin frowned and froze.

"Something's wrong here," he said. He sniffed the air. "Something doesn't smell right."

Bailey covered her nose. "It smells like fish. It's a boardwalk. What do you expect?"

He shook his head. "No, there's something more. It smells like smoke."

He peered at the gates. An archway broke the wall, its keystone engraved with a raven clutching a sunburst in its talons. The iron-banded doors stood open, and the portcullis was drawn. Behind guards clad in chain mail and tunics of black and gold, Torin glimpsed a cobbled boulevard. People stood along the roadsides, jeering.

"Something is happening inside this city," Torin said. "The people aren't happy." He gripped the hilt of his sword. "I don't like this. Let's tread carefully, and keep your sword loose in your scabbard."

After paying their toll, they entered the city and walked between tall, narrow homes, their wooden frameworks holding walls of white clay. Ahead upon the hillsides, the streets wound up toward the palace on the city crest. The sun beamed down, lighting the golden disks of Sailith temples.

Torin spotted one of the order's monks; the bald, bearded man stood ahead upon a balcony, clad in yellow robes. He held a crackling tinderbox. A wicker effigy hung upon the balcony, life-sized, shaped as an Elorian. Somebody had fashioned cruel wooden eyes and claws for the dummy; it seemed ready to leap off its tether and attack.

"This hourglass turn is the Festival of Light!" the monk shouted out. "This turn we worship the Sailith way. This turn we burn the heathens."

Below in the street, a crowd chanted. Hundreds of people were gathering to hear the monk speak. They waved their fists and their faces twisted savagely.

"Eloria will burn in our light!" shouted the monk. He brought his tinderbox to the effigy.

The wicker Elorian burst into flames, and the people below cheered. They raised their own effigies, small figures woven of leaves, wool, and wood, and soon hundreds of fires burned. The people tossed down their blazing enemies and stomped upon them.

"Idar's beard," Bailey whispered, her cheeks pale. "I see where Ferius learned his little tricks."

Torin looked ahead up another street. A second monk was chanting there, riling up another crowd. Those people too were stomping on burning effigies.

"This whole city seems full of his kind," he said, disgust swirling through him. "I see only two Idarith temples upon the hilltop, but six of Sailith." He grumbled. "For a new religion, they've spread fast."

Bailey nodded. "Hatred is easier to feel than love. War unites men more than peace. They forget that war always burns both sides."

They continued walking along the city streets. The Festival of Light raged all around. In a cobbled square, they saw a play performed on a wooden stage; handsome, armored men were battling hunched actors painted white, their masks ugly and long of nose. In another square, a puppeteer maneuvered wooden Timandrians, their small swords slaying Elorian dolls. Closer to the palace, along a boulevard lined with columns, a hundred knights rode armored horses, their raven banners held high, their swords and armor bright.

"We will light the darkness!" their lord cried, raising a lantern. "We will defend Timandra from the evil of night. We are the shield and sword of sunlight, sworn to defeat the darkness."

Bailey rolled her eyes. "All this fuss over what? We've lived all our lives in Fairwool-by-Night. So have my parents and their parents. Until Ferius arrived with his shenanigans, Elorians never threatened us. I doubt they even threaten us now."

"You wouldn't know it walking around here." Torin looked at a group of scrawny beggars on the roadside. "When you're hungry, it's easier to blame an enemy far away than your own king down the road."

Bailey clenched her fists. "Let's go see this king now. If this is how he's governing his city, I have a thing or two to say to him."

He grabbed her arms. "Bailey, promise you won't do anything stupid. This isn't Fairwool-by-Night. You can't twist people's arms, shove them down, or wrestle them into submission like you do at home. Promise you won't yell at the king."

"Oh, I don't need to yell." She pounded a fist into her palm.

"Bailey! No fighting either. We have to be diplomatic here, otherwise we're no better than Ferius."

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Oh, all *right*, Winky. Merciful Idar, you're like a fussy milkmaid." She grabbed his wrist and began tugging him. "Now come along, we won't stop a war by standing around."

They continued along the road, heading toward the palace. The houses grew larger at their sides, mansions for the city's wealthy. A fortress rose upon a hill to their east, vines crawling across its walls, a hundred guards upon its battlements. All his life, Torin had only known the Village Guard, a collection of youths who stood upon the Watchtower between tending to their fields, flocks, or workshops. For the first time he saw true soldiers, burly men bedecked in full plates of armor. They stood upon walls and towers, they marched along the streets, and they chanted for glory. Torin's own breastplate and sword, simple things forged many years ago, felt humble here, and Torin was keenly aware of their dents and scratches.

His feet were aching when they finally reached the palace grounds. A marble staircase climbed the hillside, a mile long, leading to the palace gates. White towers scratched the sky,

wonders of architecture, but Torin barely spared them a glance. His eyes were drawn to the gardens that lined the staircase, flaring out like butterfly wings across the hillside.

Cedars, flowerbeds, and grass grew between pebbly paths. Statues of ravens stood upon columns, and koi ponds glimmered in the sunlight. Birds of every color bustled in almond, cherry, and maple trees. Torin stood gaping, trying to count all the flowers he saw: hyacinths, peonies, roses, and—

"Winky!" Bailey pulled his face toward her. "Stop gaping at flowers, you silly boy, and come along."

She dragged him onto the marble staircase, and they began climbing toward the palace gates. Torin wondered what he'd tell the guards. *My father saved the king's life—please believe me? Let me through, I met the king years ago, and I promise you I'm not crazy?*

He was preparing his words when a hiss sounded ahead.

Torin froze on the staircase, wondering if a snake was slithering in the gardens. He turned toward the sound and his heart sank.

"Ferius," he said, not bothering to mask the disgust in his voice.

The monk stepped from behind the bushes, clad as always in yellow, his lip curled back. Several monks stood with him, heads hooded. Torin would have preferred to see a pit of snakes.

"Torin the *Gardener*," he said, lips pulled back to reveal his gums. "Have you come here to admire your pansies? Something tells me you care to meddle in affairs not yours. Return to your little village, little boy, and grow your little flowers. The capital is no place for your ilk." He spun toward Bailey. "And who have we here but the gardener's constant companion, the girl who thought her frail grandfather would rule her village. The man has one foot in the grave already, and when he's finally buried, I will be there to spit upon his tomb."

Torin's chest deflated. He turned to see Bailey's face redden. Smoke looked ready to plume from her ears. She raised her fists and made to lunge.

"Bailey, no!" he said, reaching out to grab her. "He just wants to—"

But he couldn't stop her. She tore free from his grasp and leaped at Ferius, fists and kicks flying.

"I've had enough of your stench!" she shouted, knocked him down, and bit his shoulder like a rabid wolf.

For an instant, pure glee filled Torin at the sight; seeing Ferius on the ground, Bailey tearing into him, was as sweet a sight as any garden. But his rational side kicked in quickly, and he reached down, grabbed Bailey's shoulders, and pulled her off the fallen monk.

"No, Bailey!" he said. "You're only giving him what he wants."

Ferius lay on the ground. Face pale, he clutched his wounded shoulder. Spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed.

"She attacked a monk of Sailith!" Lying on the grass, he pointed a shaky finger at her. "Men, grab her."

His fellow monks approached. Bailey screamed and made to lunge at them too, but Torin pushed her back. He placed himself between the combatants.

"Stop this!" he said. "Bailey, don't goad him. Ferius, go to your temples and let us be. We'll not shed blood on the palace grounds."

Ferius pushed himself up, clutching his shoulder. Grass and blood stained his robes. His tongue lashed out like a viper's.

"Oh, but blood has already been shed. And more will spill. You cannot stop this, Torin the Gardener. The Sailith Order will rule the world, both Timandra and the realm of night."

Bailey tried to run around Torin and attack again. "The Sailith Order is not worthy of ruling a gutter!"

"Men, grab this heretic," Ferius said. "Drag her to our temple dungeon. Chain her in the dark where she belongs. No sunshine should fall upon one so foul."

With a howl, Bailey drew her sword and charged toward them.

The monks drew chains from their robes, each one topped with an iron ball. They swung the weapons. Screaming, Bailey lunged at Ferius again, thrusting her sword. One monk lashed his chain, diverting her attack. A second iron ball slammed against Bailey's shoulder. She cried out and fell to her knees.

Torin's heart thudded. He had not come all this way to fail here. He leaped toward Bailey, but two monks grabbed his arms and pulled him back.

"Ferius, stop this!" Torin shouted.

More chains swung around Bailey. An iron ball slammed against her back, knocking her facedown onto the grass. Monks leaped upon her, wrapping chains around her, securing her arms to her sides. She screamed, her mouth full of soil, and flailed.

"The heretic will pay for her sins," Ferius said, laughing. He leaned down, grabbed Bailey's braids, and tugged her to her feet. Twisting her arms, the monks manhandled her forward. Hands covered her mouth, muffling her screams.

"Ferius, stop this!" Torin cried, held in the grip of two men.

Dragging Bailey away, the monk looked over his shoulder.

"Be thankful, boy, that I do not imprison you too. If your father hadn't been friends with the king, you too would linger in my dungeon." He spat. "Men, keep the boy here until he cools down. I don't want him following me. Then let the wretch be. We will not rob the king of his pet." He sneered. "But if he tries to follow me, kill him."

With that, Ferius and several of his monks spun and left the gardens, dragging a screaming and kicking Bailey.

Torin tried to break free, but the monks grabbing him were too strong. He kicked wildly, but their grips only tightened, bending his arms and knocking him to his knees.

"Bailey!" he cried after her. "Bailey, I'll get you out of there. I'll speak to the king and have you freed. Stay strong and I'll be there soon!"

She gave him a last look, eyes wide with rage and fear, before the monks dragged her around a street corner. Torin remained in the gardens, on his knees in the dirt, crying her name.

CHAPTER TEN
FISH IN A BASKET

They scuttled through the night, shadows among shadows, racing down the alley toward the man.

Belly wide and jowls swinging, he trundled down the street, carrying a basket of purchased goods: truffles, mushrooms, sausages, salted bat wings, and more. He hummed to himself as he walked, already chewing on a skewer of roasted spiders. Crumbs covered his silken gown, marring the pricey embroidery that formed stars, moons, and birds across his generous frame.

Koyee hunched over and raced forward. She peered around an alley wall, narrowing her eyes to slits to dim their glow. Her sword hung across her back. Dirt stained her once-white fur tunic, filled her hair, and covered her bare feet, but she cared little for cleanliness anymore. She stared at the food ahead and her mouth watered.

She looked across the street. She saw the twins peering from the opposite alley, ready with their clubs and stones. Koyee looked up. Upon a tiled roof she saw Longarm, leader of the gang, watching the street. The young, one-armed woman looked down, raised her hand, and nodded.

Koyee tensed. It began.

It was young, scrawny Earwig who emerged into the street first. The filthy urchin, clad in rags, limped across the cobblestones. He placed himself before the corpulent shopper, blocking his passage, and reached out his hand.

"Please, kind master, spare a coin for a poor orphan?" the boy said, eyes large and pleading, hand trembling.

The man swallowed a spider, tossed down the skewer, and lifted his basket of food higher. He frowned down at the one-eared boy.

"Get out of my way!" he rumbled. "I have no time for beggars."

Koyee was already creeping along the street, slim and fast and darting from shadow to shadow. Other people moved along the cobblestones, returning to their homes with their purchases. As she moved between them, Koyee kept glancing from side to side, seeking soldiers, but none appeared. Should any emerge into the street, Longarm was supposed to hoot like an owl, but Koyee wasn't taking any chances.

"Please, kind master!" said Earwig. "I'll dance for it. See! I can dance."

The boy made a sad attempt to dance about, flashing dirty ribbons in his hands and hopping on one foot. He sang a little song, tottering around. The shopper tried to move around him, but Earwig darted from side to side, not letting him pass.

"I dance for money. Spare a coin?"

Koyee tiptoed behind the fat man. On cue, Earwig reached out to the basket.

"What have you here, dear master? Spare me a mushroom?"

As expected, the shopper tugged his basket farther back, bringing it out of Earwig's reach . . . and into Koyee's.

She reached out, grabbed a fluffy maitake mushroom, and pocketed it.

"Move out of my way!" the man demanded. "Move now or I'll summon the city guards."

Earwig only danced with more vigor. "Don't you like my dancing? I can juggle too." He pulled glass balls from his pockets and began to juggle them. "See me juggle. Spare me a coin."

Not daring to breathe, Koyee grabbed two truffles, a puffball mushroom, and a skewer of sea urchins. When she glanced at up Longarm, the young woman was motioning her back. The raid had ended.

Koyee glanced back at the basket, which the man was still holding away from Earwig, unaware of the second thief behind him. A string of plump sausages rested there, and Koyee's mouth watered. She had not eaten meat in so long . . .

Just one more item, she told herself.

"Get out of my way, scoundrel!" the man cried and kicked Earwig aside.

Koyee reached out and grabbed a sausage.

The man kept walking down the street.

The sausage tugged on a string of ten of its brethren. They all came free from the basket, tugging its rim and slapping onto the ground.

Koyee caught her breath.

The shopper turned around and his eyes widened.

"Thieves!" he cried.

Koyee knew that she should run with her catch. Longarm had drilled it with her many times.

But her hands thought faster than her mind.

She lashed out and knocked the basket over, spilling its remaining supplies across the street.

The man lunged at her. Koyee jumped back. Mushrooms, truffles, and meats rolled across the cobblestones. As the man chased her, Koyee fled. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the other Dust Face Ghosts leap out. Shy little Whisper, the smallest among them, grabbed pickled eggs and ran off with them, stuffing one into her mouth. The twins shoved mushrooms and fish into their sacks, then fled into the shadows.

The string of sausages still in her hand, Koyee raced into an alley, scuttled up a wall, and ran across the roof. The man below roared and tried to climb in pursuit, but couldn't make it up the wall.

"Thieves!" he shouted. "Guards, catch them!"

In the moonlight, Koyee jumped from roof to roof, sailing over alleyways. Around her she saw five other shadows—the rest of the Dust Face Ghosts—leaping around her. They raced through the night, scampered down into a distant street, and vanished into the shadows.

The distant cries faded. They scurried through the labyrinth of Pahmey's slums, racing over sleeping beggars, rats, and piles of refuse. When they finally reentered the graveyard, their domain, Koyee's heart pounded and her breath burned in her lungs.

She collapsed against a tombstone, letting her catch drop to the ground. The other Dust Face Ghosts gathered around her, adding their prizes to the pile.

Koyee stared and her mouth watered.

"By the moon," she said and licked her lips.

It was enough food to feed them for several turns of the hourglass. The children all reached out grubby hands, snatching the comestibles and stuffing their cheeks. Even shy little Whisper began nibbling. Koyee bit into a mushroom and sighed as the hearty flavors rolled around her tongue.

"Stop."

The cold voice rose ahead, and a shadow stepped toward them.

Longarm loomed above, a tall, slim figure against the full moon.

Little Whisper whimpered and let her morsel drop; she cowered behind a tombstone. The others froze, crumbs on their chests, their cheeks stuffed.

Longarm stepped forward, spear clutched in hand. She pointed the blade at Koyee, keeping it only inches away from her neck.

"You let him see you."

Koyee swallowed the food in her mouth, placed down her truffle, and shoved the spear aside.

"Don't point that at me," she said and rose to her feet. "We have more food than ever now. Your way, we'd be nibbling on crumbs and still hungry. Now we feast."

"Now hundreds of people know we exist!" Longarm said. "We are the Dust Face Ghosts. We slink through shadow. We are unseen, a mere whisper in the night. If you ever pull any of your tricks again, Halfsmile, I will ram this spear into your gut."

Koyee ate the rest of her meal sullenly, glaring at Longarm. The young woman, in turn, sat with her back to them, eating hunched over.

I can't stay here forever, Koyee thought with a sigh. *I didn't leave Oshy to live in a graveyard.*

She had been visiting Minlao Palace every turn of her hourglass, but had moved up only several slots. The elders still would not see her; it would take another moon's turn, Koyee guessed. Her eyes burned. Oshy needed her help, and she was stuck here among graves and ghosts, living as a filthy thief.

"But what can we do, Eelani?" she whispered. "Should we go home?"

Her invisible friend tugged her hair, and Koyee blew out her breath. No, she could not go home, not after all this. Not without aid. And besides, what awaited her back in Oshy? An empty house. An empty life. No more father or brother. Nothing but sadness and fire burning in the west.

"Halfsmile?" Whisper tugged her tunic, her eyes huge in her thin face. "Halfsmile, can you tell me a story before bed?"

Koyee nodded. "I'll tell you the best story, the one about the sun and moon."

The child smiled and lowered her eyes. Her true name was Layli, she had whispered once, but no Dust Face Ghost had a true name anymore. She spoke in but a whisper, too timid to let the others hear. "I like that story."

Koyee laid the girl to bed under her tombstone, the one shaped like a seashell, and told her the stories of the olden days—the stories her father would tell. In these tales, the sun rose and fell, daylight followed night, and Timandrians and Elorians were one people. Many scoffed at these stories—Longarm had when first hearing them—but Koyee liked telling them. Perhaps they were only myths, but Koyee liked to imagine a world like that, a world not divided across the dusk, a world where no sunlit demons could murder a man.

When Whisper fell asleep, Koyee lay down beside her, closed her eyes, and let dreams fill her.

Life in the city continued, a life of grime, ghosts, and graves.

Every turn of her hourglass, Koyee returned to the palace, glared at the guards, waved her ribbon, and demanded to enter. Every turn she was cast away, and she returned to the marketplace to steal, to hide, to survive. She became quicker, sneakier, able to cut a purse like a true ghost, to snatch food from a thousand carts, to scuttle over walls and vault across roofs and disappear into a crowd.

"I have become Halfsmile," she whispered to her shoulder spirit in the solitude of her grave. "This is who I am now, no longer a fisherman's daughter, but a ghost in the night. I can barely remember the woman I was. I can barely remember Koyee Mai."

It took the woman with the fish to remind her.

Koyee had spent a moon's turn with the Dust Face Ghosts, and her knees were scraped and her hair black with dirt when they came across the old woman. She hobbled down the road, leaning on a cane, a shawl framing her wrinkly face. She carried a basket, within it a single fish.

If you could call it a fish, Koyee thought, watching from the roof. It seemed barely larger than a minnow and old too; Koyee could smell it from here. The old woman wore rags, and dirt

caked her bare feet. She was only a frail thing, worse off than the scrawniest of thieves.

Koyee looked across the street, seeking her fellow ghosts. The twins stood in an alley, weapons raised. The younger boy, Earwig, knelt behind a barrel. Whisper, the smallest of the bunch, crouched behind a cart, clutching a doll to her chest. Upon another roof, Longarm stood supervising the raid with hard eyes.

The old woman kept hobbling down the street, paused to cough, then continued, every step a struggle.

There was nothing to steal here. Koyee looked across the street to the other roof. She met Longarm's gaze and shook her head.

The one-armed woman stared back, the moon above her. Her eyes blazed. She raised her hand, looked down at the twins, and nodded.

The two boys, the warriors of the gang, lumbered into the alley and raised their clubs.

The old woman only smiled and kept limping forward.

One of the twins trudged forward and shoved the old woman. When she fell, the second twin grabbed her basket and yanked it free.

"Stop it!" Koyee shouted.

Rage exploded through her. Stealing food from wealthy, well-fed merchants was one thing. Knocking down a frail old woman, however . . . Koyee leaped from the roof and landed on the road.

"Stand back!" she said to the twins.

Taller and wider than her, the boys raised their clubs and grunted.

"Halfsmile, back away!" rose Longarm's voice from above.

Koyee turned toward the fallen old woman. When she knelt by her, the twins grabbed Koyee's arms.

She wrenched herself free, shoved them back, and drew her sword. She pointed the blade at them.

"Back!" she said and sliced the air. "Stand back or I'll cut you. Whisper!" She gestured for the little girl to approach. "Help the grandmama stand. Give her back her basket and fish, and give her some mushrooms from your pocket. We'll find food elsewhere."

She swung her blade again, holding the twins back as Whisper ran forward. Terror filled the girl's eyes, but she obeyed, helping the old woman rise.

"Back!" Koyee said, spinning to stop the other Dust Face Ghosts from approaching. The thieves surrounded her now, staring with cold eyes, their weapons raised. "I'm stopping this raid. Back off now or I'll cut you all."

She panted, spinning from side to side. She did not recognize this part of herself. Koyee had never felt such fury; perhaps it was fear and hunger that fueled her anger.

A shadow leaped down.

Longarm landed before her, spear in hand, and growled.

Not removing her eyes from her foe, Koyee said, "Whisper! Take the grandmama to safety. Go."

From the corner of her eye, she saw the young girl lead the elderly woman away. Koyee remained in place, pointing her blade at Longarm.

The leader of the Dust Face Ghosts was perhaps missing one arm, but the rest of her body was tall, strong, and lithe. She was the oldest among them, even older than Koyee, and the cruelest.

"You have been causing too much trouble, Halfsmile," she said and spat at Koyee's feet. "You cost us a fish."

Koyee raised her sword higher. "The old woman needed it more than us."

"I don't care." Longarm stepped closer. "You do not lead this group of survivors, girl. You do not make these choices. You serve *me*. Now go after that crone, bring me her fish, and I might forgive you."

Koyee stared at the young woman for a moment longer. The two glared at each other silently.

Finally Koyee broke the stare.

With a grunt, she sheathed her sword and walked down the street, approaching the old woman. She felt the other Dust Face Ghosts watching from behind.

The elderly woman recoiled at the sight of Koyee and her sword. Blood trailed down her leg.

"Please, my child, don't hurt me," she whispered. "I have nothing of value, please."

Koyee reached into her pocket, took out seven copper coins, three plump chanterelles, and a sausage—all the money and food she had. She placed them into the woman's basket, keeping only a single coin.

"Now you do, Grandmama," she said. "These are yours. Go and may the moonlight bless you."

She escorted the elder out the alley and into a wide, crowded street, then turned to look back. Her eyes fell upon the Dust Face Ghosts. Whisper had run back to join them; she now hid behind Earwig's legs. They all stared at her, eyes wide, silent, awaiting her next move.

Koyee sighed.

"This is not our life, Eelani," she said softly. "This is not our home. This is not who we are. We've been alone, just you and I, for a long time. We can survive on our own again."

She gave the Dust Face Ghosts a last nod. She met Whisper's eyes, smiled, and raised her hand in farewell.

She turned and left them behind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
A COUNCIL OF KINGS

Ceranor the First, King of Arden, stared outside his tower and his frown deepened. He could not remember the last time the frown had left his face; men liked to joke that should he ever smile, mirrors would shatter and babes would die of fright. Yet Ceranor had never found much reason to smile. He had been a soldier, a savior, a usurper, and now a king; his was a life of worry.

"But my shoulders are still broad," he said, staring out the window at the city of Kingswall. "And my mind is still as sharp as my blade. I will survive this fire too."

Despite twenty years of sitting upon his throne, he was still a soldier at heart. A good soldier always fought. A good soldier never fled.

Below in the city, the fires spread, smoke rose, and rage simmered. Tens of thousands marched along the streets, chanting for war. The commoners—filthy, dressed in tatters, their bellies tight—pounded the air, burned effigies, and stomped upon the flames. Sailith monks led the processions, preaching of the Elorian evil, of the terrors that lurked in the night. With every word, the people howled louder, demanding blood, demanding death to Eloria.

"Yet so easily, this rage can turn," Ceranor said softly. "This hourglass turn they blame drought, disease, and despair on Eloria. This turn this fire is contained. Next turn it can spread . . . and come to this palace."

A high voice, distorted with a yawn, rose behind him.

"Cery! Let's take a little nap."

Ceranor turned from the window. Upon his bed, his wife sat crossed-legged. Dressed in an oversized azure tunic, she yawned magnificently, a yawn that raised her arms, splayed out her toes, and twisted her face like clay. When her yawn ended, she grinned at him.

"I'm sleepy," she said.

Ceranor's frown, already deep, deepened further. He grumbled. He had married the girl, thirty years his junior, to appease her father—an angry lord with coffers deeper than his own. The girl was a vacuous, silly thing, barely twenty and about as intelligent as a puppy.

"The commoners rage with hunger and fear, Linee," he told her. "The Sailith temples grow in power; already some say they're mightier than this palace. And across our borders, our old enemies muster, still dreaming of their revenge." He sighed. "And you want to take a nap."

She pouted. "I like naps."

Ceranor stared at the pretty, flighty young creature, a girl of golden elflocks, freckled skin, and vacant eyes. He shook his head, walked to his table, and lifted a mug of water. He always drank water, never wine. Wine dulled the senses; it was a fool's drink.

"Another drought or plague, and the commoners will storm this palace," he said. "If the Sailith grow too strong, they will convert this place into another temple. If our neighbors sense our weakness, they will storm across our land and sack our city. They will invade this chamber too, Linee. Only my wits are holding back the tide. Only this council can save my throne."

"*Our* throne," Linee corrected him. She rose from the bed, flounced toward him, and clung to him. She grinned up at him, her chin pressed against his chest. "It's my throne too. I'm the queen now. I'm the prettiest queen Arden's ever known! Nobody would dream of overthrowing me, because I'm beautiful and friendly. The people love me."

Silently, Ceranor cursed the girl's father. Sometimes he wondered if the man had truly craved an alliance with the crown, or if he'd simply wished to offload a halfwit. Ceranor knew that many men envied him for his wife, a beautiful young bride for an aging soldier. At fifty years of age, Ceranor's hair was graying and his brow was creasing, but his wife was young and fair.

Yet Ceranor saw little value in beauty alone. Unlike other kings, he donned no embroidered, dyed robes; he wore the steel plates of a soldier, the same armor he'd worn to the wars twenty years ago. Unlike other kings, he grew no luxurious beard but kept his face clean-shaven. He wore no jewels, no finery, and no gems or gold adorned his sword. Many mocked him, calling him the Soldier King behind his back. Ceranor wouldn't mind them calling him that to his face.

A soldier is strong, he thought. *A soldier always fights on.*

He looked down at his wife. She was clinging to his side, grinning like a fool, and trying to tug him back to bed. Her golden locks cascaded around her face, and her eyes gleamed with love for him.

He stroked her hair. "War has never hardened you, my sweet bride. You've never known blood, pain, or the horror of battle. I have. I must succeed or your innocence will shatter."

She blinked at him. "Do you have to go to another boring council?" She pouted. "I don't want you to leave. Your meetings are always so long and I get so bored here." She stamped her feet. "Tell those other kings to leave. This isn't their kingdom."

Ceranor sighed. "It will be, unless I can turn their armies away from our borders." He turned back to the window, stared out at the simmering city, and nodded. "We must rally the people, we must appease the Sailith, and we must turn our enemies away. Only one thing can do this, my dearest wife." He looked at her. "War with Eloria."

Linee blinked at him. "The Nightside? But it's oh so dark there. They say they don't even have butterflies or flowers in the night." She turned away from him and crossed her arms. "I don't want you go there. Stay here in the day. It's nicer here and we can have naps together."

And she wonders why I spend so long at my councils, he thought. *I'm surrounded with raging commoners, a bloodthirsty temple, and hostile neighbors . . . yet sometimes I think my greatest bane is my wife.*

He left her in their chambers to sleep. He stepped onto a spiraling stone staircase, climbed down the palace's eastern tower, and walked down a columned corridor. When he approached the oaken doors of his banquet hall, he paused and steeled himself.

Behind these doors lurk my greatest enemies, he thought. He had fought his fellow kings in fields, jungles, and snowy mountains, leading armies to clash and burn and bleed. He had never faced them like this, trapped between stone walls, using words rather than blades. Yet now the safety of Arden would be sealed not on the battlefield, but at a simple table.

With a deep breath, Ceranor opened the doors and entered his hall.

Porphyry columns rose in two palisades, their capitals shaped as ravens, the birds of Arden. A vaulted ceiling spread above, painted with scenes of clouds and sunbeams. Marble statues of erstwhile monarchs stood along the walls, gazing upon a round granite table. Upon jeweled, ivory chairs sat his seven fellow kings of Timandra.

With shuffling robes, chinking beads, and creaking armor, they all rose to face him. They stared silently.

Ceranor paused for only a heartbeat, resisting the instinct to draw his sword. He had fought these seven too many times; a couple he had dueled hand-to-hand. Three were fellow kings of fallen Riyona, an empire which had collapsed a thousand years ago, splitting into four kingdoms. The others governed foreign

lands nearly as strange as the night. As their armies mustered, here the Eight Sunlit Kings would duel with words . . . or his throne would burn.

He approached his seat, the one empty chair, but did not sit. He placed his hands on the table, leaned forward, and spoke in a slow and steady voice.

"Welcome to Arden! Welcome to the kingdom of the raven. It has been many years since all Eight Kings of Sunlight gathered in one hall. I am honored to host our great council. You have crossed great distances to be here, traveling by ships and carriages. Some of you have traveled for two full months. It is my pleasure to—"

"Enough with the pleasantries!" one king blurted out. He slammed hairy fists against the tabletop. "Bring us *wine*, damn you."

Ceranor frowned. He stared at the man, if a man he was; the King of Verilon seemed more like a bear, the sigil of his kingdom. Tall and burly, he wore brown furs; beneath them, his arms and neck were nearly as hairy. His beard sprawled out like the roots of an oak, all but hiding his red cheeks. Ceranor remembered how, twenty years ago, this brute had nearly slain him with a hammer; if not for Teramin Greenmoat's shield, Ceranor would have died that winter in the snow.

"Very well," he said. The interruption peeved him, but the memory of that swinging hammer chilled his anger. He snapped his fingers, and two servants stepped forward from the shadows. "Pour the kings wine. We shall drink and talk."

"More the former than the latter," said the hirsute King of Verilon. He snorted, grabbed a pitcher of wine from a servant, and drank deeply, the red liquid pouring down his beard and robes.

Barbarian, Ceranor thought, disgusted.

When all the kings held goblets of wine, Ceranor cleared his throat and tried again. "My fellow kings, the past few years have been difficult for Timandra. The plague has ripped through our land of Arden; it has felled many in your lands too. Drought has covered the plains, stretching north and south, and—"

One of the kings, a thin and tall man with golden skin, stood up.

"A drought for you, King of Arden, would be a season of rainy blessings for us in Eseer." He smiled, showing teeth as white as his robes. "What do you know of drought, king of green lands? You should visit the desert; there you would see true hardship and true hardiness."

Ceranor bit his tongue, cutting off an acrid reply. The people of Eseer, a southern desert land, were even deadlier than the barbarians of snowy Verilon. Their sigil was the scorpion, and their sting was just as deadly. Ceranor thanked Idar that at least Arden didn't share a border with these sandy warriors.

"Thank you for your invitation," Ceranor said, forcing himself to speak diplomatically and ignore the barb. "Yet we in Arden, and in the other northern kingdoms, are unaccustomed to dryness and heat, for our lands are lush and blessed." He couldn't help but sling a barb of his own.

He looked across the room, wanting to drink to clear the bile from his throat, but daring not; he would need his senses. Each one of these kings ruled armies primed for war. Together they could devastate Arden as the kingdom of the raven struggled to recover from its woes.

"Have you summoned us here to weep?" demanded one king, a red-headed man clad in tiger furs. Two spears and a shield hung across his back, and beads filled his fiery beard. He was King of Naya, the jungle realm south of the Sern River, land of the tiger. "I have traveled for many days, and I am hungry. Will you not serve us food?"

"He speaks wisdom!" shouted another king, a tall man with shaggy blond hair, a walrus mustache, and a horned helmet. He was King of Orida, the northern island kingdom of the orca, ruler of seafarers and raiders. "I desire no talk; first let us feast. Bring us some meat fresh off the bone."

Other kings voiced their approval. The King of Daenor, the western coast of crocodiles, muttered that he'd not traveled two months to stare at a barren table. The King of Sania, the southern island of elephants, smoothed his clanking garment of gold and silver beads, licked his lips, and spoke of tasting the delicacies of the north.

Ceranor stood, flummoxed, moving his head from side to side. The feast he had planned was still cooking, and the bizarre humor of the situation nearly stilled his heart.

I survived wars, hungry commoners, and power-craving monks, he thought. *I never imagined my downfall would be a late dinner.*

Finally a voice rose, thin and soft like a sharpening stone against a blade, cutting through the ruckus. All other voices died. Ceranor's hackles rose, and his teeth ached as if the voice had loosened them. He turned to see a man regarding him. Though he must have sat there the whole time, for no seats had been empty, Ceranor had not noticed him until now, as if the man had blended into the others, a whisper under screams, a shadow in a cavern, a smile behind the blade of a killer.

"Calm your bellies, close your mouths, and open your ears," said the man, his voice but a gentle hiss, a pleasant voice that just hinted of malice. "We are guests in a hall of kings, not a tavern." He bowed his bald head. "Please, King Ceranor, speak."

Ceranor's heart sank. Here sat the King of Mageria, the land west of Arden, a realm of plains and towering mountains. Unlike the others, this man wore only a white robe; he could have easily passed for a humble philosopher. And yet Ceranor thought him the most powerful of the kings; the lands of Mageria were revered

for their magic, and their warriors fought not only with blades, but with bolts of lighting and arrows of power.

Twenty years ago, Ceranor thought, *I found your armies in this very palace. I found the corpse of our old king bloodied at your feet.* Ceranor couldn't help but clench his fists. With an army of twenty thousand, Ceranor had driven the enemy out of Arden. He had since sat upon the throne himself, a soldier turned king . . . and he had since waited for these enemies to return.

The kings fell silent, and Ceranor spoke again.

"I've not summoned you here to weep," he said. "I've summoned you here to find solutions to our problems. Our fields wilt and our people riot. In all eight kingdoms, hunger rips through towns, farms, and villages. The plague still rages in Naya and in Daenor; many fear it will return to the rest of us. Our armies have grown large and our generals thirst for war; our troops still clash at our borders. This cannot continue. This risks all our thrones."

The King of Verilon snorted and slammed down his mug. "My throne is safe; I am no weak southerner."

This time Ceranor could not curb his anger. "Last time our armies met in battle, the forces of Arden marched halfway through your forests and burned half your kingdom. None of us is safe." He looked toward the other kings. "You have fought Arden in the past, and we defeated you. Yet now we face a common danger—the threat of hungry, frightened people. They are a force greater than any army. A raging peasant with a hungry belly is more powerful than ten armed knights. I've called this council to tell you: Timandra must fight united. All eight sunlit kings must face the darkness together. Let us join our armies. Let us rally our people around a common cause, turning their rage away from us. Let us march into the night itself, our banners flying high, and conquer the land of shadows."

For a long time, silence filled the hall.

Then all seven began to shout, shake their heads, or laugh. Some cried out that Eloria was but a dead land, that the night dwellers were but a myth, a story told to frighten children. Others sighed and said it was a pointless adventure, that Eloria was too cold, too dark, too dangerous.

Ceranor raised his voice.

"You have seen my city!" he said. "You rode through its streets and saw its people burn fires. They scream with fury. Yet not against me. Against Eloria. Against the darkness. My throne is safe so long as my people hate somebody else. Are your thrones as secure?" He balled his fists. "You muster armies, but if you attack Arden, you gain nothing. If you attack Eloria with me, you gain something far more valuable than my lands." He forced himself to smile thinly. "You gain a scapegoat. Join me, my friends. Together we will do something that has never been done. We will conquer the night."

Finally they fell silent and stared. And Ceranor knew he had them.

The scents of cooking meats filled his nostrils, and he turned to see servants entering the room, carrying dishes of roast boars, stewed greens, and steaming pies.

"Ah!" he said and rubbed his hands together. "The food has arrived."

* * * * *

"Will they join us, Your Highness?" said the monk. "Will they fight?"

Ceranor sat upon his throne, an artifact of oak, ivory, and gold that rose upon a dais. He had never liked this seat. Twenty years ago, he had found the old king dead at its base, body mangled and burned. With his armies, Ceranor—a young commander—had driven the Magerians from this hall. He had

taken the throne for himself, but he rarely sat upon it. It still felt foreign. He still felt more a soldier than a king.

But this man I will place before my throne, Ceranor thought, staring at the robed figure. *This man must gaze at me from below. This man must never forget that I am King of Arden and he is lowly.*

"Yes, Ferius," he said and couldn't help but grimace; the man's very name tasted foul. "The seven other kings will fight with me. All suffer the rage of hungry commoners. All seek a scapegoat."

Below the throne's dais, Ferius clutched his yellow robes. His beady eyes, far-set and pale blue, blazed with hatred.

"The Sailith Order cares not for commoners or the concerns of kings," he said, and though standing several feet below, his eyes met Ceranor's gaze; there were few who dared meet the gaze of a king. "The Sailith Order cares only for the light of the sun . . . and for the extinction of the demons."

Ceranor stared upon this man and saw only hatred, only lust for blood.

A useful fool, the king thought. The Sailith bred hatred, and hatred could be funneled. Hatred could be directed away from a throne and toward the shadows.

Ferius is all passion, while I am reason, Ceranor thought. *Ferius is a fiery heart; I am a cold mind. And that is why I sit here and he stands below.*

"Do any suspect it was you who slew the girl in the dusk?" he asked.

Ferius shook his head. He licked his chops like a snake, tongue darting.

"None know, Your Highness. The girl was but a filthy orphan. Nobody saw me drag her into the shadows. Nobody heard her scream as I took her life." He sucked in his breath, seeming to be in rapture. "Her death will pave the way to light."

"Yes, that's all fine," Ceranor said, impatient. The monk's fervor disgusted him, the passion of a beast; a true man crushed emotion and let logic reign. "Ferius, how ruthless are the Elorians? You fought them in Fairwool-by-Night. Who are we facing?"

Ferius snorted. "I fought them? No, Your Highness. The cowards never did attack the village, even after we returned the bones of their slain."

Ceranor sucked in his breath and rose from his throne. "You told me that Fairwool-by-Night burned! You said that fifteen died. Now you tell me the Elorians never attacked?"

A hiss fled the monk's lips like steam fleeing a kettle. "My monks and I had to disguise ourselves as Elorians and burn the village ourselves." He laughed, a sound like ice cracking. "I dare say that answers your question about the Elorians, Your Highness. They are cowards and weak. Our armies will crush them."

"My armies, Ferius, not ours." Ceranor narrowed his eyes. "You are playing with a dangerous fire. Slaying an orphan and blaming Eloria is one thing. Burning half a village? You go too far, monk. I ordered you to start a war, not slay fifteen of my people."

Ferius did something no other man in Arden would dare. He snarled at the king. His eyes burned. His face twisted into a rabid mask. His lack of eyebrows, his high forehead, and his sharpened teeth made him look more a reptile than a man.

"I did what I had to!" he said. "The death of one child, as sweet as it was, was not enough. Fairwool-by-Night had to *burn*. Since the Elorians were too cowardly to burn it themselves, I had to. I am following the will of Sailith. The Elorians are fully evil. I will do whatever I must to destroy them." He cackled. "And already the news spreads. Merchants sail from Fairwool-by-Night with the tidings. I myself have shouted it from the balconies of

Kingswall. The rage grows strong, Your Highness; with this rage, we will smite the demons."

Ceranor stood, hand on hilt, staring down at the man. Ferius stood several feet below the dais, but he gazed up with the ferocity of a beast about to strike. Even upon his throne, clad in armor, bearing a crown and sword, Ceranor felt his blood freeze.

Merciful Idar, he thought. *Fifteen of my people slain . . .*

He had fostered the Sailith fire, thinking he could tame it, but that fire was now spreading too wide for his liking.

He sat back down. "Do any suspect you? When you burned my houses and butchered my people, did any see your face?"

Ferius spat—right onto the marble tiles of the throne room, an offense that would cost most men their heads.

"One suspects. Bailey Berin, the mayor's daughter, has accused me of the deaths. I took care of that problem. I imprisoned her here in this city; she languishes in the dungeons of the Sunlit Temple. A boy traveled here with her, one Torin Greenmoat." He snorted. "A weak fool, though I spared him the dungeon. He is the son of your savior; consider his freedom my gift to you, Your Highness."

Ceranor did not miss the scorn in the monk's voice, did not miss the implication of weakness.

"I will deal with Bailey," the king said. "She is not yours to imprison; she's the daughter of one of my nobles. And I will deal with young Torin too. Ferius, they are my concern now, both of them. You've done your task. Stay away from those two; they are under my protection. Now leave my hall."

Smiling thinly, Ferius sketched an elaborate bow; his every movement dripped mockery. He turned to leave, then looked over his shoulder back at the king.

"Your Highness," he said, "for my service, I ask for but one reward."

Ceranor squared his jaw. "What is that?"

The monk stepped closer to the throne and clenched his fists. "When we invade Eloria, I want to slay them all." His mouth watered and his voice twisted. "We will not just conquer them. We will not just punish them. I want them all dead. Every last one."

Ceranor froze, for a moment not even able to breathe. Yes, this fire was blazing too bright.

He stepped down the dais. He marched toward Ferius. The monk was nearly a foot shorter, but wide of shoulders and jaw, and he stood his ground.

"It is the King of Arden," Ceranor said, "who will decide who lives and who dies. Remember this, Ferius the Monk. Now leave this place. Return to your temple; that is the place you govern, not the palace."

Ferius gave a toothy smile, but his eyes remained cold. With a flourish, he spun on his heel, robes swaying. He marched out of the hall.

For a long time, Ceranor remained standing below his throne, silent and still.

"Invading Eloria might not be enough to appease the Sailith," he whispered to this hall's ghosts of fallen kings. "They will demand genocide."

He returned to his throne. He sat, wondering how much longer he could cling to his power, and sighed.

"Being a soldier was easy," he muttered to himself. "Being a king will kill me yet."

CHAPTER TWELVE
THE KING'S COMMAND

In the palace gardens, surrounded by flowers and birds and beauty, Torin met the King of Arden to discuss a war.

"Torin!" said the king, walking down a garden path. "It's good to see you, son."

Despite the welcoming words, no warmth filled Ceranor's voice. His face remained hard, the lips down turned in a perpetual frown, the eyes cold and black. Torin knew to expect this; his father had often told tales of how King Ceranor never laughed, never smiled, never drank, and never seemed to enjoy anything but a good scowl. Torin had not seen the man in years, not since the king had visited Fairwool-by-Night for Teramin Greenmoat's funeral. Aside from a little more gray in his hair, he hadn't changed.

He wasn't much older than me when my father saved his life, Torin reflected. *He could have died in the snow decades ago, skull shattered by a Verilish hammer. And yet this man lives on, and my father lies dead.*

Torin made to kneel, but Ceranor grabbed his shoulders, tugged him up, and gripped his arm. He nodded firmly.

"Come now, you need not kneel before me," he said. "I am a king now and you a gardener, but we are both soldiers at heart."

Torin wasn't so sure about that, but he only bowed his head. "Your Highness, it's good to see you too."

The king scrutinized him. "You've grown since I last saw you. You look like your father."

Torin laughed weakly. "My father, they said, stood taller than every man in Arden's army. I'm short and too thin." His

laughter died, and he took a deep breath. "Your Highness, I have so much to say. I came here as fast as I could. I . . ."

He didn't know where to start. So many words rose in his mouth they jammed, leaving him speechless. Should he begin by accusing Ferius of masterminding a war? Should he argue for peace? Should he plead that the king send men to free Bailey from the dungeon?

"I know, son," Ceranor said. "You don't have to speak. I know why you're here." The king sighed and they began walking down a pebbly path between hedges. "I know of your friend Bailey. I know of your conflict with Ferius. I know of what happened at Fairwool-by-Night. We'll sort this mess out."

Torin blurted out, "What happened at Fairwool could have been avoided. I don't know what Ferius told you, but I know what I saw. The man is a snake. He goaded the Elorians again and again like a man goads a war dog before a fight. He lusts for war; all his work in our village has been to start one. My king, war need not happen. We can still achieve peace with the Elorians."

The king stopped by a hedge of peonies, watching a bumblebee fly from flower to flower. "Torin, war is already upon us. I've met with the other Sunlit Kings here in our city, and we've all agreed: The threat of Eloria must finally be dealt with." He turned his cold, hard eyes upon Torin. "We will march into their darkness and we will defeat them. This cannot be avoided."

Torin froze. He couldn't even gasp. All the greenery, flowers, and beauty around him darkened. He felt as if he stood back in the dusk.

"My king!" he said. "You cannot do this! I've seen an Elorian. I've fought one. I know we can make peace with them. Don't let Ferius poison your mind—"

"My mind is my own," the king said sternly, but then his voice softened. "Torin, son, I hate war more than anyone. I have fought wars before. I fought in the snows of Verilon with your

father. I fought the Nayans in their southern jungles. I fought the Magerians, the most ruthless of our enemies, in these very gardens. I do not lust for battle, but neither will I fear one. Your father fought bravely as well; he did not fear to fight."

Torin couldn't believe what he was hearing. He lowered his head and clenched his fists at his sides.

"My father always told me that the wisest warrior knows when *not* to fight." He looked up at the king from under his eyebrows. "If he were here, he would call for peace."

The king's frown deepened, and they kept walking down the path. Goldfinches and grackles flew overhead, landed upon the grass, and pecked for seeds. A dogwood rustled.

"We walk here surrounded with life, light, and beauty," said Ceranor. "I chose to meet you here, for I know of your love for things green and growing. Yet across the border, in the darkness, evil brews. Ferius is a violent man; that I know. He lusts for blood; I do not share his passion. Yet I am afraid, Torin. I know it's strange for you to hear. I know you see me as a hero, as a strong and noble king, yet even I am afraid." He shook his head sadly. "Eloria attacked your home. I fear that they muster for more violence. Do you not believe that they are evil, Torin?" He turned to look at him, eyes narrowed. "Do you not believe that the Elorians crave our blood?"

The king's eyes were so cold Torin was surprised they didn't wilt the gardens. He looked down at the pebbly path.

"I don't know, Your Highness," he said honestly. "All I know is that for years, until Ferius arrived in my village, we lived peacefully alongside them."

"And that peace shattered. Do not blame Ferius for the crimes of the night. That is like blaming a wild dog for barking at a forest fire." They walked under an archway bedecked with vines, heading toward a fountain. "Torin, you hate violence and you love peace. Those are qualities I admire and share. You are cold water

to temper Ferius's flames. Which is why I want you with us. March with me into Eloria. Fight at my side. Swing your sword with mine and speak your wisdom into my ear."

Torin froze. He whipped his head around and stared the king.

"Your Highness! I am no warrior like my father. I cannot go into battle with you."

"And why not? You serve in the Village Guard. You protected our border. You fought the Elorians in Fairwool-by-Night and in the dusk itself. No other man in my army has done these things." The king clasped Torin's arm. "I fought with your father in Verilon, yet now we head into greater danger. I want you by my side in the dark."

Torin planted his feet firmly on the path.

"I refuse," he said simply. "I know you are my king. I know I should obey. But this I cannot do. I cannot fight a war I don't believe in."

The king watched two starlings chase each other around an almond tree. "And yet our warriors would believe in you. They believed in your father; he was a hero to them. They need a hero in this war too." He passed his hand over a row of roses, then pulled his finger back when a thorn pricked it. "I cannot be that hero; I must a leader, a king, a steel monarch. But I am not a man of the people like your father was. If my soldiers know that Torin Greenmoat, son of Teramin, marches with them, their hearts will fill with courage. So will mine. I do not command you to join. I am asking you. Not as a king, but as a friend."

Torin swallowed. Merciful Idar! How had this happened? He had come here to beg for peace, and now the king not only demanded war but insisted Torin join too.

Bailey would know what to say, he thought. She'd stamp her feet, twist the king's collar, and demand that he listen to reason.

Torin sighed. She'd probably get tossed back into a dungeon, but at least she'd get her point across.

"My king," he tried again, "please speak to Bailey. Free her from the dungeon or visit her with me. Hear what she says. She believes that no Elorians ever attacked our village, that Ferius himself burned it in disguise. She languishes in prison because she accused him of this ruse. Will you listen to her? I beg you: send men to free her, bring her here, and hear her words. She's my friend. Grant her freedom and the chance to speak of her suspicions."

I hope you're all right, Bailey, he thought, belly twisting. He worried about war with Eloria. He worried about marching into the night himself. But mostly he worried about her. In all the halved world of Moth, she was the dearest person to him, and he could not rest while she languished underground.

The king walked toward a bed of hyacinths and tulips, turned toward Torin, and stared at him steadily.

"I would be happy to free Bailey," he said. "She's a good friend of yours. Same as I was good friends with your father. I still care about friendship. We'll head straight to the temple and free her from its dungeon. Furthermore, I will command Ferius to never harass her again. Are we agreed then? You will march with me to Eloria?

Torin stared back, eyes narrowing.

"Are you . . ." He tilted his head. "Your Highness, are you saying you will only free Bailey if I join you in this war?"

The king stared at him a moment longer. His words spoke of friendship, but no compassion filled his eyes, only ruthless calculation. The king's face seemed as cold and hard as a stone jabbing into flesh.

"Choose, Torin," said the king. "Choose wisely. Return to your gardens . . . or march with me into war, and Bailey will be freed."

Torin stared back, mouth agape.

He's serious, he thought. *By Idar, he means to let Bailey remain underground unless I join him.* He swallowed. *I'm not a soldier! I'm just.. I'm just Torin the Gardener. How could I inspire the troops, even if my father was a hero?*

He shut his eyes, remembering walking into the dusk with the bones of the slain Elorian. He remembered seeing the young woman there, the Elorian girl with the scarred face. He remembered her eyes, blue and as large as chicken eggs, staring at him in fear and wonder. He remembered the lights of the village gleaming behind her.

They are a peaceful people, he thought. *I know that they are. How could I march with my king to burn them?*

In his mind, the vision of the Elorian girl melted, and he saw Bailey's face. She smiled at him mockingly and called him Winky. Freckles covered her nose and cheeks, and her two golden braids shone in the sunlight. He ran with her through the fields, swam in the river, and wrestled with her atop bales of hay.

Bailey. My foster sister. My dearest friend.

And he saw her shackled in the dungeon. He saw the monks of Sailith torturing her with blades and whips. He saw her aging in chains, growing old and feeble, crying for him to save her.

I must save you, Bailey, he thought, eyes stinging. *You would want me to spit upon the king. You would want me to leave this garden in disgust. But I cannot leave you.*

He lowered his head and touched the hilt of his sword, the same sword he had fought the Elorian with. He raised his stinging eyes, looked at the king, and swallowed a lump in his throat. He nodded.

"Let's go free Bailey."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
THE ELDERS

She wandered through the city, thin and caked with dirt, a wild thing like a gutter rat. Once she had hunted upon the moonlit plains, clad in white furs. Now she scuttled through alleys, her tunic in tatters, scrounging for scraps. Once she had fished upon the Inaro River, steering her boat to the very edge of dusk. Now she crept and pounced upon spiders, stuffing them into her mouth before her revulsion could stop her.

"I've gone from a proud woman of Eloria to an urchin," Koyee said softly. "And still the elders won't see me."

How long ago had she left Oshy? It must have been almost two moons, Koyee thought. Most times she could not see the moon at all; it hid behind pagodas, towers, and the smoke of ten thousand chimneys.

As Koyee walked toward Minlao Palace yet again, as she did every hourglass turn, her belly ached and her eyes stung. She had not eaten or slept in far too long. The graveyard had been safe, the ghosts—both real and imaginary—guarding her sleep. Now Koyee slept upon roofs and in alleys, one eye always open, scanning the darkness for danger. Twice men had attacked her in her sleep, and twice she had bolted up, swung her sword, and scared them off. Those encounters left her feeling brittle, a threadbare rag fluttering in the wind.

"Pahmey," she whispered, looking up at the glittering towers of the city center. "Jewel of Eloria. The light of the darkness. The scourge of urchins and beggars."

Step by step, her bare feet black with grime, she emerged from the slums and wandered the wide, cobbled streets of the city's wealthy. Koyee did not like walking here. Too many soldiers patrolled these boulevards, wont to banish her back into the dregs. Yet still Koyee came here every hourglass turn, her hair in tangles, her belly tight, her sword across her back.

Armor clanked ahead and boots thudded.

Koyee leaped aside, hid behind the statue of an ancient emperor, and watched ten soldiers march down the road. They looked as glorious as she was filthy; their scale armor shone in the starlight, and their smoothed faces stared ahead blankly. Katanas hung across their backs, the hilts adorned with tassels, and round shields hung upon their arms.

When they had passed her by, Koyee emerged from the shadows, quick and silent as a spider, and continued up the street.

When she reached the palace again, she approached the robed guards and already felt her belly sink. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her blue ribbon. So many times she had come here, begging for an audience, only to be told to wait.

"Yet we have to keep trying, Eelani," she said. "We have to warn them of Timandra. We have to bring aid back to Oshy."

Her shoulder spirit hopped upon her shoulder. Koyee knew what she was thinking.

"Yes, Eelani, and we need to eat too. We'll find food soon, I promise. We can steal without the Ghosts too."

She reached Minlao, stared up at the crystal tower, and saw the elders move within its dome. With a sigh, she waved her blue ribbon at the guards.

"It's me again," she said. "Koyee Mai of Oshy."

The guards, tall and stoic and clad in white robes, smiled as they always did. Koyee stuffed the ribbon back into her pocket and turned to leave.

"Now let's go find some food, Eelani."

A pleasant voice rose behind her.

"Koyee Mai of Oshy. The elders will see you now."

She froze.

Her eyes narrowed.

She spun back toward them and tilted her head.

"Can you repeat that?" she said.

The guards smiled gently, as if they were commenting on the weather, as if Koyee hadn't begged them for entry since the spring.

"The elders of Pahmey will see you now. Koyee Mai of Oshy, bearer of the blue ribbon?"

She nodded hesitantly, still not sure this was really happening. "Yes, that's me."

The guards moved aside, exposing the gates.

"Your audience is granted, Koyee Mai. Enter the crystal palace, and may the wisdom of the elders bring you peace."

Her heart burst into a gallop. So many emotions swirled through her: relief, fear of Timandra, anger at her delay, and eagerness to finally deliver her warning. She didn't even care that she was clad in tatters, caked in dirt, and scrawny as a stick. She darted between the guards, raced up marble stairs, and barged through the gates into Minlao Palace.

A glass chamber awaited her, larger than all the huts in Oshy combined. She had never seen such splendor. A pool lay in the center, full of fish of every color. A staircase of golden wire coiled around the water, rising up the tower. Glass tubes topped its railing, full of water; glowing fish swam within, moving up and down the staircase, to and from their pool.

Koyee's mouth watered, and she was tempted to reach into the pool for a fish, but she had no time for a meal. She began to climb the staircase, twisting around the pool below, ascending the crystal tower.

With every step, the pool grew smaller below, dwindling to a mere puddle. Koyee climbed, legs weak and head spinning, only her resolve driving her on. She panted but dared not grab the railing for support. Even a hundred steps up, fish still swam within the glass tubes, their fins tipped with glowing bulbs, darting up the tower and back down to their home.

The walls glimmered around her, carved of crystals. Through them Koyee could make out the glimmer of the city lights, thousands of lanterns spreading across the hill. She tried to search for landmarks, but could see no more than blotches of light and shadow.

She was wobbling, coughing, and gasping for breath when she finally reached the tower top. She must have climbed a thousand steps.

"Oh merciful moonlight, Eelani," she said, wheezing, and fell to her hands and knees. "We used to be stronger, don't you think?"

It was a few moments before Koyee could stand again. When her heart slowed and her head stopped spinning, she beheld a door forged of silver and gold. She cleared her throat, turned the knob, and stepped inside.

Her breath died anew.

"It's . . . it's like being inside the moon," she whispered.

She stood within a dome—a dome so large, she thought a castle could fit inside. The walls and even the floor were made of glass, and as Koyee walked into the chamber, she squeaked in fright. This was no opaque glass like the bricks of the slums. This glass was pure and transparent; Koyee felt like she was walking on air. Below her feet, she could see the city roll out. Streets, houses, people, statues—they all seemed as small as toys. A smile spread across her face.

"It's beautiful, Eelani," she whispered, eyes damp.

Her shoulder spirit tugged her hair, and Koyee raised her head. She gasped.

An obsidian table stood ahead upon the glass floor. On its surface stood a brazier shaped like a dragon's mouth, flames crackling between its bronze teeth. Fifteen chairs surrounded the table, and upon them sat old men. They wore robes of silver, gold, and white silk, and embroidered sashes encircled their waists. Around their necks hung moonstar amulets. Their white beards flowed down their chests, between their knees, and onto the floor. Their eyes, almost as large as Koyee's fists, turned toward her.

Koyee wasn't sure what to do, and so she simply knelt.

"Elders of Pahmey," she said, head lowered. "I am Koyee Mai of the village of Oshy upon the dusk. I come bearing a warning." She looked back up at them. "Timandra has attacked us. A sunlit demon of the day slew my father. Our village needs aid."

The elders gazed at her, blinking silently.

Koyee straightened and stared back.

The silence stretched on.

Finally Koyee cleared her throat and spoke again, louder this time; perhaps the elders were hard of hearing.

"A Timandrian crossed over from the dusk!" she said, letting her voice echo in the dome. "He slew my father. I saw the prints of many more. I fear that they will attack our village again. Please, elders of Pahmey, send aid to my village. Send soldiers to defend Eloria."

Again they only stared at her silently, blinking. Several stroked their beards, and others looked up through the crystal dome, studying the stars.

"Elders of Pahmey!" Koyee repeated, heart thrashing. "Will you not speak?"

Her fingers shook and she wanted to throttle them. Had she survived all this time, come all this way, only to be ignored?

Finally one old man, his beard rolling across the floor, opened his mouth and spoke in a voice like crumbling parchment.

"The Timandrians, child, are but a myth. No living creature can survive the heat and light of a blazing sun." He smiled like a grandfather to an errant child. "The sunlit half of the world is a wasteland, a great hearth that burns all life."

Koyee could barely breathe. Her eyes stung. She took a step closer.

"I saw one!" she said. "I saw a sunlit demon. A Timandrian." Her voice shook. "His eyes were small like the eyes of a rat. One of them was green and the other black. His skin was bronze, his hair dark as dirt." A tear flowed down her cheek. "The Timandrians killed my father. They burned him to nothing but bones. Please, elders of Pahmey, heed my warning or the Timandrians will attack again. They are evil. They thirst for our blood. They will sail down the river and they will reach this city too and—"

"Child!" said another elder, voice sharp. He rose to his feet, a slim and frail man. His fingernails coiled out, a foot long and painted gold and lavender. "You saw only a vision in the dusk. I visited the border many years ago. The light shines there, cruel and taunting, and shapes seem to scurry within it. You saw only the whisper of a dream, only a legend, no more real than ghosts or sea monsters."

Koyee's fists shook. She looked from elder to elder. "You must believe me! I saw a demon. I truly did! I . . ."

Her words trailed off. She caught a reflection of herself in the glass walls, and she realized how she looked. A frail thing coated in dirt, her hair wild, her face scarred.

They thought she's only an urchin, she realized—one of the many mad souls who wandered the city streets, shouting of prophecies or doom or monsters in the night.

"Timandrians are real," she said again, but her voice was quiet now. Defeated.

The elders nodded sympathetically, and their stern faces softened. Kind smiles raised their mustaches.

"You have nothing to fear here in Pahmey, child of the border," said one, his skin naught but wrinkles. "You are safe here in our city, strong walls and strong guards protecting you. No monsters or ghosts can harm you. Now run along downstairs and seek our kitchens; a warm meal will await you there."

Koyee lowered her head, deflated. She took a few steps back toward the door and then looked over her shoulder. She spoke with a loud, trembling voice, tears in her eyes.

"Timandrians live, and they are cruel, and they will attack Oshy, and they will attack all of the Qaelin Empire, and their light will burn across Eloria. You will see them too, elders of Pahmey, but it will be too late. Their light will burn this city like flames burn meat."

With that, she spun around and ran downstairs, her eyes burning. She fled the palace grounds. She raced across the city streets, not caring if guards saw her. When finally she entered an alley, she curled up in the shadows, gritted her teeth, and whispered burning words.

"I will stop them, Eelani. I will stop the Timandrians. I will face them alone, just me and my sword, if I must. I will protect my home."

Her shoulder spirit nuzzled her cheek and said nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE BONE FLUTE

She walked through the city streets, head lowered and throat tight. She passed by the alleys, gutters, and abandoned boxes she had spent so many nights in, shivering and hungry and scared. She stepped through puddles, over beggars, and around piles of refuse, crossing the hardships she had lived through, the grime she had waited in, the poverty that had been overtaking her soul.

What could she do now? Seek aid elsewhere? Travel east to Yintao, capital of Qaelin, the mythical city where Shenlai the dragon was said to fly? Koyee lowered her head. No. Yintao lay so far across the rocky plains even the fastest nightwolf, running like the wind, would take two full moons to reach it. Walking barefoot across the plains, Koyee would starve long before she reached that fabled city. She could sooner build a ladder to the moon.

"There's only one place to go now, Eelani," she said, eyes burning. "We're going home."

Eelani hopped on her shoulder; Koyee could almost feel the patter of small, invisible feet.

"I know, Eelani. I know we're going home empty handed. But I still have my sword." She gripped the hilt, wincing at the grime that covered its blue silk. "We'll defend Oshy ourselves, you and me and Sheytusung. It's not much, but . . . if I must, I'll die for Eloria like my father did. But I'll die with a sword in my hand, fighting for my kingdom, not starving in a slum's gutter."

As she walked through the market, she looked around at the shadows. She saw several thieves, beggars, and urchins scurrying there, but not the Dust Face Ghosts. Not the one she sought.

"Goodbye, little Whisper," she said. "You're the only one I will miss here."

For the first time in almost two moons, she reached the city gates of Pahmey, the blue archway towering, its bricks embossed with golden dragons, stars, and moons.

"I entered these gates a proud woman of Eloria, the daughter of a soldier," she said to her invisible friend. "I leave in rags, dirty and alone and famished."

Her eyes stung as she walked under the archway, stepped between the guards, and left the city of Pahmey.

She walked across the docks, worming between sailors, merchants, and beggars. A dozen ships sailed ahead in the river, and a hundred were moored along the docks. The moonlight shone on sails, figureheads, and the jewels of wealthy captains. Fishermen sorted their catches upon the boardwalk, and the scent of fish filled the air.

"Goodbye, Pahmey," Koyee whispered and looked over her shoulder, giving the city of crystal and glass a last look.

She approached the dock where she had moored *Lodestar*. She walked past cogs, junk ships, and a fisherman's raft. She reached the peg where she had tethered her boat . . . and froze.

Lodestar was gone.

Koyee rolled her eyes and blew back a strand of hair. "Oh, Eelani, you're so silly. You chose the wrong dock."

She returned to the boardwalk and walked along the river, scanning the rows of vessels. Yet still she could not see her boat.

"This isn't funny, Eelani!" she said, her pulse quickening. "Do you see our boat?"

She walked faster. Soon she was running. She raced along every dock, scanning every boat. A hundred were moored here, and she passed by each one a dozen times. She raced along the boardwalk, searching for missing piers, but found none.

She fell to her knees.

"*Lodestar* is gone," she whispered. "It was stolen."

Of course. Of course it had been stolen! Most other ships here were guarded or secured with chain and padlock. Yet Koyee was from Oshy, a village where nobody ever stole a thing.

"I think if we learned anything on the streets of Pahmey, Eelani, it's that everyone steals here." With a deep sigh, she sat upon the dock, dangled her feet over the water, and closed her eyes. "What do we do now?"

Her friend embraced her cheek, warm and comforting. Koyee took deep breaths, forcing her fear away. Fear would not help now.

"Fate is punishing us," she said. "We stole and now we're paying for our sins. We'll have to catch a ride with somebody else upriver. Maybe we can sneak onto another boat." She bit her lip and groaned. "By the stars, no, that won't work. Summer just started. Boats won't sail to Oshy for moons and moons." She grumbled, cursing the small size of her village; boats replenished Oshy with supplies only twice a year. She rose to her feet and looked along the river. "We'll just have to walk. It'll be a long walk . . ."

Her belly grumbled. A woman walked by, carrying a basket of clacking clams. A young boy was shucking oysters by a wall. The smell of fried fish rose in the distance, and Koyee's mouth watered. Once more, she had no food left and only one copper coin. She had hoped to fish along the river, using the net and rod upon the *Lodestar*. Now Koyee didn't know where her next meal would be found.

"It would take a full moon to walk home, Eelani," she said, her spirits sinking. "I can't walk as fast as I sail. I can't fish without my gear. I don't know how we'll survive the journey." She lowered her head. "We could try to catch spiders or worms on the way, or hope we come across migrating stonebeasts, but . . . it's more likely we'd find not a morsel."

The realization slowly sank in.

She was trapped here.

She looked back at the city and a lump filled her throat.

"Is this our fate? To live in the muck again?" She rose to her feet, squared her jaw, and dried her eyes. "I will not walk with you along the river until you die of starvation, Eelani. We'll still go home. Instead of fishing on the way, we'll just have to pack enough supplies. We'll return to Pahmey for only an hourglass turn—that's all, I promise you—and collect what we need. A fishing rod. Enough food to last a moon, in case we can't catch our meals. But no more stealing, Eelani." She shook her head vigorously. "Fate has punished us for our sins, and now we must find what we need honestly."

She wasn't sure how she would do that . . . but she didn't want to worry Eelani. Her invisible friend was worried enough as it was.

She walked back to the city gates. She reached into her pocket and produced her last coin. With a sigh, she paid her toll and reentered Pahmey.

She wandered the streets but refused to let despair overwhelm her. She pursed her lips.

"All right, Eelani, we'll never find enough money to buy a new boat, but we can buy a fishing rod. We'll need jars of mushrooms too. And we'll need a pack for carrying it all." Wind blew between the houses and she shivered. "And if we can, we'll buy a cloak. We just need enough for thirty hourglass turns; it won't take longer to walk home."

Once she was back in Oshy, she wasn't sure how she'd survive there either. Without a boat or a father to help her, would she simply starve in her village? She pushed that worry out of her mind. She still had friends in Oshy; they'd help her. Poor villagers were often kinder than wealthy city folk.

She ambled through the marketplace. A hundred peddlers shouted around her, calling out their wares, selling everything from roasted silkworms to bronze cutlery. When a child knocked into a cart, spilling its mushrooms across the street, Koyee was tempted to grab some along with a horde of other thieves. She forced herself away.

"No more stealing, Eelani. I know you're hungry, but we have to be honest now. Fate punished us for stealing once, and I won't steal again." She sighed and tried to ignore the tightness in her belly and the delicious smells in her nostrils. "We'll have to find work."

She had no trade but fishing, but hunger drove her onward. It took her away from the marketplace, across the city's crest, and downhill again to the northern slopes. The river was distant here, and its smells and sounds had faded. Along the northern walls, cramped together like bones in a bag, festered Soot Valley. Here did Pahmey toil. Smiths, masons, tanners, weavers, cobblers, and dozens of other masters labored here in squat shops. Gone were the glass bricks of the southern neighborhoods. Workshops here were built of black stone, rising three or four stories tall. Koyee heard hammers banging on anvils, smelters simmering, animals squealing in butcher shops, and the clang of a thousand tools. Oil, grease, tallow, blood, and countless other scents rose from the shadows. Everywhere she looked, grime covered Soot Valley, a cloak of filth. Hundreds of chimneys pumped out blue, green, and black smoke.

Koyee stood above the neighborhood, hesitating, but then nodded.

"We'll find work here, Eelani. I'm a fisherman's daughter from Oshy. I don't fear hard work. It will only be until we earn enough money to leave."

With a deep breath, she walked down into the grime, shadows, and smoke.

She approached a smelter first, a wide building of sooty walls. When she stepped inside, she nearly choked. A dozen men, clad in grimy robes, were shoving wheelbarrows of iron ore. Great cauldrons, taller than her, bubbled over fires. Ladders and pipes ran everywhere, and smoke filled the air. Molten metal bubbled and flowed, its smell burning Koyee's nostrils, and she covered her nose.

"Work?" said the master smelter and snorted. "This is no place for a little girl. Run along and find a seamstress to work for." He turned toward workers who were leaning over a cauldron. "Men! No. Not yet—try that one."

Koyee left the workshop, thankful to escape the smell. She tried a butcher shop next, only to be turned away again. A smithy, a glassmaker, and a brickmaker yielded no better results, scoffing at the fisherman's girl who knew nothing of their trades. A chandler chased her away with a stick, accusing her of coming to steal his wares. A gem cutter was kinder, but he could offer Koyee only apprenticeship, not coins. A tanner gave her a bowl of stew and a listening ear, but he could not afford to hire her.

Koyee wandered among the workshops, head hung low.

"It's useless, Eelani," she said, eyes stinging with smoke. "They want me to know their trades already, they want me to apprentice for free, or they chase me away with sticks." She sighed. "At least we got a bowl of stew. I want to work hard, but it won't be for somebody else, it seems. We'll have to create our own trade. And not thieving!"

She yawned and stretched. She was tired, but she could not sleep yet. She had lingered here too long. Her hourglass lay in her pocket; she didn't know how long she'd been wandering here, but it felt like at least an hourglass turn.

Her eyelids heavy, she wandered into a new neighborhood, a nest of twisting streets along the eastern hillsides. Tall, narrow houses rose around her, built of stone, dusty glass, and sometimes

just leather stretched over bone frames. Wires hung between the roofs, holding tin lanterns that swayed, casting green and orange lights. Outside dozens of shops, merchants sold fabrics, beads, buttons, and needles. Koyee saw silks and furs of every color, some simple, others ornate and embroidered with sky or sea motifs. Shoppers roamed the streets, caressing fabrics and haggling over their price. Inside several shops, tailors were measuring their patrons and recommending fabrics. The poor folk bought simple white fabrics, but the wealthy bought ornate robes of blue, gold, and green that shimmered in the moonlight.

"Do you think anyone here will offer me work, Eelani?"

As Koyee wandered between the fabric shops, music filled her ears. She turned toward the sound. The smallest man she'd ever seen—he was barely taller than her waist—stood at a corner, playing a lute and singing. His white beard rolled across the ground like a scroll, and he wore green and yellow motley. A pewter dish lay at his feet, and passersby tossed in coins.

Koyee's eyes widened.

"Look, Eelani! Look at all those coins." When she felt invisible hands tug her head, she rolled her eyes. "No, I don't mean we'll steal them. I mean . . . this is what we need to do. We'll have enough money in no time." She tapped her chin. "Of course, there is one snag in the plan. We don't have a musical instrument, nor would we know how to play one. But how hard could it be?"

She watched the little man play, wishing she had money to give him, but nothing filled her pocket but her hourglass. When he had finished one song and was stretching his fingers, Koyee gingerly approached.

"Dear master musician," she said, "you play beautifully. I have no coin to pay you, but I promise that if you help me, I will return with payment. Where did you buy your lute? I would very much like to buy one too."

The little man smiled at her, revealing a golden tooth. "Try Yatana's shop," he said, his voice as high pitched as his tautest lute string. "Walk up the road, turn left twice, then turn right at the well, and you'll see it there. Tell him Little Maniko sent you. I would be happy to give you lessons for a few copper coins."

She smiled. "Thank you, Little Maniko. I promise that when I can, I will pay you."

She followed the instructions, got lost twice, but finally made her way to a narrow street. Dusty awnings stretched overhead, hiding the sky. Only three lanterns swung here on a wire, casting pale light across cobblestones and narrow buildings of green, opaque glass. One building, tall and narrow and topped with bronze tiles, bore an iron sign shaped as a lute. Koyee stepped inside, entering a dusty, warm chamber.

Shelves filled the room, brimming with pipes, lutes, drums, flutes, and horns. Candles burned between them, wax melting like snake skins. In silver plates lay gems, beads, rare coins, geodes, and river stones.

"Hello?" Koyee said and sneezed in the dust. "Is anyone here?"

The shopkeeper emerged from behind a pile of leather-bound books. He was a tall, elderly man with long white hair, a thin nose, and a beard strewn with beads. His one eye was large and bright; the other was hidden behind a scarf.

"What is the easiest instrument here to play?" Koyee asked.

He blinked at her, moving his eye up and down, taking in her bare feet, muddy legs, and ragged fur tunic.

"Do you have money?" he rasped.

Koyee sighed, reached into her pocket, and pulled out her hourglass. Her heart twisted. Her father had gifted her this timepiece, and she had carried it with her for years. Head lowered, she held it out.

"I will trade you this for an instrument," she said. "It's worth a lot. It's a rare masterwork."

The elderly shopkeeper took the hourglass, tilted it a few times, and tapped it.

"Simple glass and simple sand," he said. "You can buy these for a single copper at the market." He shook his head and sighed. "Let me see what I can find for you, young waif."

Koyee waited, twisting her fingers, wondering how difficult playing a lute could be. She looked at a few on a shelf, filigree coiling across their frames. It hurt to give up her hourglass, but these lutes were beautiful too, and with the coins a lute could earn, she could return home. She moved her fingers as if already practicing her instrument.

Finally the old man returned, shuffling his slippers. In his gnarled hand he held a simple bone flute.

"Here, little urchin. For your hourglass, I will trade you this."

Koyee raised an eyebrow. "Is that it? This is only . . . the cheapest instrument you have. It's not even brass. It's nothing but a bone with some holes!"

He nodded. "And you are offering nothing but an hourglass. A lute costs three silver coins. If you ever have that much money, you may return to purchase one."

Koyee's eyes widened. "Three silver coins! I could practically buy a boat for that. Who has three silver coins?"

He glared at her. "Not filthy, barefoot urchins covered in grime. Do you want this flute or not? If you will not trade, take your hourglass and leave."

Koyee groaned, stamped her feet, and was prepared to leave in a huff. And yet she could not. She needed an instrument—even a humble bone flute—more than a timepiece. The stew had given her some strength, but she was hungry and thirsty again, and her tunic hung loosely across her thin frame.

With a sigh, she took the flute from his hand.

"I will return for that lute someday," she said and left the shop.

Outside on the quiet, dark street, she dusted the flute against her tunic, only smearing it with more dirt. She raised it to her lips, winced at the tangy taste, and gave it a blow. A shower of dust and cobwebs flew out, thick with baby spiders. Koyee grimaced, shook the flute wildly, and blew again.

A quavering note emerged, the sound of a hungry babe crying for milk.

Koyee shook the flute again, blew into its finger holes, and tried a few more notes. It sounded awful, something between a dying rat and a squeaking wheel stuck in mud. She lowered the flute and sighed.

"Oh, Eelani, I think people will pay us to be silent." She blew back a lock of hair. "It might just work."

She made her way back to the fabric district. At the end of the street, Little Maniko still stood playing his lute. Koyee stationed herself at a busy corner, cleared her throat, and began to play.

Her music did not improve, and several people winced as they walked by. She tried to play an old tune her father had taught her, but didn't know where to place her fingers. And so she resigned herself to simple puffs, emitting random sounds as best she could.

Before anyone could toss her a coin, Maniko came lolloping toward her.

"Little girl, little girl!" he said, struggling to hold his beard up from the muck; its tip still trailed along the ground. "You cannot play here."

She lowered her flute. "Why not?"

As tall as her waist, he shooed her back. "This is Little Maniko's street. We buskers never share a street. You must find

your own place." His voice softened and he lowered his hands. "I'm sorry, little girl, but you cannot share my turf. You should try the marketplace. There are many streets there where you can play."

Koyee thought back to the market, remembering the jugglers, puppeteers, and singers who performed at most street corners. She chewed her lip, wondering if all that turf was taken too.

"Thank you, Little Maniko," she said and bowed her head. "Perhaps we can meet again and you can teach me a few things."

He sighed and reached out his hand. "Here, show me this flute."

She handed it to him. He cleaned its tip against his vest, then brought it to his lips. Koyee gasped and her eyes widened. Beautiful music emerged from the flute! The little man's fingers moved so quickly she barely saw them. He played a song of moonlight, of birds in the night, of dancing spirits on distant stars. Tears filled Koyee's eyes.

"I . . . I thought the flute was broken," she said.

He smiled and patted her hand. "Here, let me show you one or two things—a free lesson."

She sat down beside him. Her belly rumbled, and she needed food and drink badly, and her head felt light with hunger. But she forced herself to listen, to move her fingers as he taught her, and soon she was playing a simple tune. Her fingers, though longer and slimmer than his, seemed so clumsy. Because of the scar, which lifted the corner of her mouth, she struggled to close her lips around the flute, and some air kept escaping out the side. And yet she kept practicing as Maniko patiently guided her.

It was an old tune called "Sailing Alone", fitting for a fisherman's daughter, and finally Koyee could play it without error. When she played the music on her own, without Maniko's fingers guiding hers, a passerby tossed her a copper coin.

"You are a natural, Koyee Mai!" the little man said. "Go and play your music. Make Little Maniko proud, and perhaps someday we will play together."

She smiled and kissed his forehead. "Thank you, Little Maniko."

She tried to give him the coin, but he brushed it away.

"This money is yours. Now go! Make beautiful music."

She left the street, trudging through the alleys back toward the city's south. Her pockets and belly were empty. She had lost her hourglass, but she had her flute, she had hope, and she had a new friend.

* * * * *

"So let me get this straight," Bailey said, hands on her hips, standing on the prow of the ship. "We sailed to Kingswall to stop the day from attacking the night . . . and while I was in the dungeon, somehow you managed to get all eight kingdoms of Timandra to sail east to invade Eloria. And to top things off, you're going to invade with them." She tilted her head. "Did I miss anything, Winky? Or am I correct and while I was away, you basically made things the very worst they could possibly be?"

They stood upon the *River Raven*, the flagship of the Ardish fleet, a carrack of four masts, two hundred feet of deck, and a hull bearing a full thousand warriors. It was the largest ship in Arden; some claimed it the largest ship in the world. It flowed down the Sern River, leading a fleet of a hundred more ships that spread behind, an army sailing to war. Looking at the trail of masts and sails, Torin sighed.

"It wasn't entirely my fault, Bails," he said.

She shoved him across the deck, eyes flashing. Torin tried to ignore the snickers he heard from surrounding sailors.

"*I* would have talked sense to that oaf of a king," she said. "*I* would have stopped this rubbish. And now look at you!" She jabbed a finger against his breastplate and tugged at his cloak. "Now you're wearing the armor of a soldier. Now you plan to . . . to . . ." She covered her face. "Now you will sail to war."

Torin looked around him, praying the king hadn't heard, but Ceranor stood across the deck, conversing with his generals. The king wore plate armor, the golden half-sun of Idar upon his breastplate; a second halved sun formed the pommel of his sword. His helmet was shaped as the raven of Arden, a masterwork of gold and onyx, its visor beaked.

He's not a man of Sailith, Torin thought, *but I don't trust this king. Now I wish my father never saved his life.*

Awkwardly, Torin placed an arm around the distraught Bailey.

"It won't be that bad," he said, knowing he was lying. "The king promises it'll be a short campaign. We'll enter the night, light a bunch of torches, make a lot of noise, and scare the Elorians a bit. And then we'll come back home. This won't be a long war like the one my father fought. The Eight Kings just want to flex their muscles, then sail home with stories of adventure."

He thought she was weeping, but when she pulled her hands away from her eyes, they were not teary but blazing with fury. She placed both hands against his breastplate and shoved him against the ship's railing. He nearly toppled overboard.

"How do you know that?" she said. "Torin, look around you! The entire fleet of Arden is sailing east. The *entire fleet*. I don't think they left a single cog behind. And look at the riverbanks! Soldiers march everywhere, Ardish troops in the north and Nayans in the south. All of Timandra is mustering! Short war?" She laughed bitterly. "You really did it this time, you foolish boy."

He stepped away from the railing, leaned toward her, and grumbled under his breath.

"Lower your voice, Bailey. You're embarrassing me in front of the other soldiers."

She snorted. "The *other* soldiers? Do you think you're a soldier now just because you wear the black and gold cloak? You are a *gardener*, Torin. A gardener. Not a fighter. Even if you couldn't stop the war, why did you agree to fight it?" She tugged both her braids. "In the name of sanity, remove your armor and tell the king you won't fight. If you can't stop this war, stay in Fairwool-by-Night with me and grow your gardens. Don't take part in this."

Torin looked at the northern riverbank. Across the plains of Arden, thousands of troops marched, cloaked in black and gold, their breastplates bearing their raven sigil. Their banners fluttered, and their knights rode upon armored horses. When Torin turned to look across the starboard bow, he saw the southern lands of Naya, grasslands sprawling toward the jungles. Warriors marched there too, wearing tiger skin cloaks and hoods, their spears bright and their red beards thick. Sailing upon the Sern River, Torin would not pass through Timandra's six other kingdoms, but he knew that troops were moving there too.

Never before in Moth's history have all Eight Kings of Daylight marched together, he thought. *Bailey is right. This will not be a short war. This will be a war to change the world.*

He looked back at Bailey. She was staring at him, head tilted, breathing heavily. She was his foster sister, his best friend, and Torin didn't know how to tell her. How could he reveal his secret—that he had joined these forces to save her from the dungeon? That he most likely marched to his death in the darkness?

If I refused to fight, the king would have kept you in prison, he wanted to say. *If I back down now, he will let Ferius imprison you again. I'm only doing this to protect you.*

Yet he could not speak these words, but only stared at her silently, looking into her brown eyes.

You will blame yourself if you knew, Bailey. If I die in the darkness, the guilt would break you. You cannot know that I'm doing this to save you.

And so he remained silent, and Bailey groaned, rolled her eyes, and turned away from him. She crossed her arms and stared across the river.

"You are not the boy I knew," she said. "My Torin would never have agreed to fight."

With a sniff, she ran across the deck and into the hull. Torin wanted to chase her. He ached to embrace her, to reveal his secret, to soothe her . . . but he did not know how. So he only remained upon the deck between soldiers as all around him Timandra's armies flowed eastward.

Torin lowered his head, thought about the young woman with the scarred face, and wondered how many Elorians would die.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
BUSKERS AND THIEVES

"Go—away, away!" shouted the wild-haired woman, her eyes bugging out. She held a drum in one hand, a knife in the other. "Away! My corner. Mine."

Koyee bared her teeth, hissed at the woman, and reached for her sword. Sheytusung was a blade of legend, an ancient weapon forged by master smiths, its steel folded and hammered a dozen times. Koyee drew a foot of that steel, but her foe—wielding nothing but a knife of sharpened bone—refused to back down.

"This is my corner," the woman repeated. Her snarl revealed only three teeth. "I play drum here. No flute. No flute here."

Koyee grumbled and slammed her sword back into its scabbard. The woman seemed crazed with hunger; unless Koyee was prepared to kill, she'd have to find another street corner.

"Your drumming sounds like the heartbeat of a dying whale," she said and spun around. She marched away, her own heart beating madly.

She sighed and tried to ignore the tightness of her belly. She had been wandering the city for . . . she no longer knew, not without her hourglass, but it felt like a lifetime. Wherever she found a busy street corner full of purse-carrying shoppers, some busker, juggler, or beggar chased her away.

"They're more territorial than nightwolves, Eelani," she muttered. "Is every street in this city already claimed?" She sighed. "How will we ever earn enough money for the journey home?"

Her belly gave a rumble. "How will we even earn enough money to live another day?"

She walked down another street, one of thousands, a strand of gossamer in a web she thought she'd never escape. No people filled this small, cobbled road, and grime covered the walls of glass bricks. A rat scurried down the road, and Koyee tried to catch it—she had seen beggars eat rats before—but it fled into a hole. Her legs itched—they had been itching for a long time—and she scratched them until they bled. An insect landed on her arm and bit her. Koyee slapped it dead, then tossed it into her mouth, nearly gagging but forcing herself to swallow.

"The nice thing about being filthy is the free insects," she said to Eelani. "If I pretend, they taste just like crayfish. Do you remember how we'd eat crayfish at home? Beautiful, red crayfish simmering in a pot, filling our hut with their smell?" Her mouth watered. "I miss home, Eelani. I know you do too."

Clouds thickened overhead, hiding the stars and moon, and it began to rain. Koyee was thankful. Rain cleansed the dirt off and gave her something to fill her belly with. Shivering in the cold, she knelt by a puddle, lowered her head, and drank until her belly bulged. It would trick her hunger into waiting a while longer. The water was brackish and filled her mouth with dirt, but she forced herself to keep drinking.

She walked on, shivering in the cold, her tunic and hair drenched. She had not stopped shivering for a long time, though when she touched her forehead, it felt warm.

"I'm scared, Eelani," she whispered, walking under an awning and around a few discarded barrels. "I'm scared that we'll turn into that woman, a crazy old thing with three teeth, playing a drum on a street corner fifty years from now." Her eyes stung. "We should never have come to this place. I miss home so much. I miss my father."

Invisible hands tugged her ear, and Koyee tightened her lips.

"Yes, Eelani, you're right. We can't despair. Despair leads to hopelessness. Despair worsens every hardship. It's a pit we would never escape. We will fight on." She raised her chin. "We will not abandon our home or our lives."

She kept walking, passing through a cobbled square where elders sat at stone tables, playing *xin*, a game of seashells and bones. The Library of Pahmey rose to her north, its columns forged of crystal, its steps carved of marble. Its dome gleamed as the moon emerged from the clouds. As Koyee walked by, several women exited the library, walked down the stairs toward the square, then froze when they saw her. They wore fine fabrics, the green and blue silk embroidered with golden wings, and glowing jewels filled with the lights of lanternfish. Staring at Koyee, their faces twisted in disgust, and one pinched her nose shut.

Koyee wanted to shout, to scold them, to hurl insults their way. But she felt too ashamed. She caught her reflection in a crystal column: a half-starved thing, limbs stick-thin, hair bedraggled, her face scarred and twisted. A lump filled her throat.

"Is this who we are, Eelani?" she whispered. "A creature?"

She turned away, eyes stinging, and walked on. She wondered if she was going mad. She wondered if Eelani even existed, or whether the invisible friend was only the product of insanity, a figment of a crazy beggar's fever.

A few streets away from the library, Koyee found a little cobbled square; it was barely larger than her missing boat's deck. A bronze statue of a bird stood here, its beak holding a sign that read: "Bluefeather Corner."

Behind the sign stood the square's namesake: a corral of bluefeathers. Each taller than Koyee, the wingless birds stood chained to posts, tilting their heads. Their eyes blinked, purple eyelids clacking like metal shutters, and their beaks opened as

Koyee approached, as if they were hoping for treats. Saddles topped their backs, woven of leather and tin, hourglasses affixed to the horns. The birds' owner sat upon a pedestal, looking bored, an empty mug in his hand.

Koyee looked around the square. She saw only a few other people. One man stood outside a seashell shop, sweeping his patio. A fortune teller sat upon a stone chest, sound asleep, his eyebrows and mustache fluttering with every snore. A tavern nestled into the shadows, its awning displaying the words "The Fat Philosopher"; a fat man stood sweeping outside, looking more like a cook than a sage. A woman walked toward the corral with her daughter, paid a few coins, and rented a bluefeather, promising to return the bird once its hourglass ran out.

"This is as good a place as we'll find," Koyee said. "Bluefeather Corner—our stage."

She positioned herself between the corral, the seashell shop, and the fortune teller. She cleared her throat, dusted off her flute, and began to play.

Her fingers were weak and breathing hurt her throat, but she kept playing. As her notes flowed, she thought back to her friend Maniko, the little man with the large beard. *Make me proud, Koyee,* he had said. And so she played as best she could, though her eyes stung and her notes trembled. She played the song he'd taught her—"Sailing Alone", an old tune she could imagine had been written for her. She had sailed alone to this city, and still she sailed alone through the seas of her loss and fear.

I will make you proud, Maniko. I will make you proud, my father. I am not a filthy creature. I am Koyee Mai of Oshy, the daughter of a warrior. I will live.

An elderly couple walked by, carrying baskets of dried fish. The husband smiled at Koyee, reached into his pocket, and tossed her a copper coin.

Hope leaped in Koyee's chest. She had earned a coin! A true piece of copper without stealing! She almost stopped playing with joy, and tears filled her eyes. She nodded and played on.

She played for a long time.

Few people walked across the square, and most did not spare her a glance, but some did toss coins her way. When the woman and her daughter returned with the bluefeather, they listened for a while, then each gave her a coin.

When Koyee finally finished playing, a smile trembling on her lips, she had fourteen copper pieces.

It was more money than she'd ever owned.

Delicately, she placed the bone flute into her pocket; it was now her most precious possession.

"We'll have to save this money," she said to Eelani. "We can only buy a humble meal for now, then rest and come back and play some more."

She stepped toward The Fat Philosopher, the rickety tavern. It was too poor an establishment for glass bricks; its walls were humble clay. But Koyee wasn't picky, not after so many meals scrounged from trash. She brushed her tunic, raised her head, and stepped inside.

A shadowy chamber awaited her. Lanterns hung from the ceiling, their tin shaped as fat, smiling faces. Skewers of sea urchins, spiders, and mushrooms lay upon a counter. Five bone tables stood here, only one empty; diners sat at the others, eating from clay bowls. Dust and grime covered the floor, but the scents of delicious foods rose from the kitchen. Koyee's mouth watered and her belly growled like a cornered wolf.

"Remember, Eelani," she said, sitting down at the empty table. "Only a few nibbles. We have to save our money."

The corpulent cook greeted her, clad in green silks, and bowed his head. His cheeks were plump and pink.

Oh, to the sunlight with frugality, Koyee thought.

She slammed all fourteen coins onto the tabletop.

"I want the best meal this can buy and a bed for a turn," she said. "I want to spend every last one of these coins, so make this a feast."

She could swear she felt Eelani sigh against her cheek. Koyee only smiled tremulously.

The cook took her money and soon returned with a tray laden with food. Slices of roast fowl steamed in a lacquerware bowl, doused in gravy and topped with spiced milkcaps. Fried lanternfish filled a second bowl, and steamed clams filled a third. Wine glimmered in a pewter mug, a golden liquid from fermented matsutake mushrooms.

"Will this be to your liking, young mistress?" asked the cook.

Her mouth watered so much she could barely reply.

"Yes," she whispered, nearly fainting. "Yes, this will be fine."

She surrendered to the food.

Her eyes rolled back with the first bite.

It was heavenly. It was the best thing she had ever eaten. Her entire body shook as the energy flowed through her, filling her with warmth and nourishment and healing. The roast meat melted in her mouth, flavored with sliced truffles. The dried fish *crunched*. The wine swirled and fizzed. She had needed this so badly that tears filled her eyes.

After her meal the cook showed her upstairs, where Koyee found a warm bed topped with fur blankets. After sleeping for two moons in graveyards and alleys, this humble mattress felt better than the bed of an emperor.

For the first time since arriving in Pahmey, Koyee slept soundly. She slept for what felt like two hourglass turns.

Fed and rested and feeling better than she had since her father's death, she returned to Bluefeather Corner. She placed the flute between her lips and played some more.

Her notes floated through the night air.

Silks swaying, the people of Pahmey walked back and forth.

Coins gleamed in the moonlight at Koyee's feet. She played on.

I will see my home again, she swore as she played. She closed her eyes and let her soul float with the music. On its wings, she could imagine that she was back home, back in Oshy with her father and brother. She played a song of moonlight on the great plains, a song of stars reflected in the river, a song of family and childhood. It was no longer the song Maniko had taught her. Here in the dark, eyes closed and hair billowing in the wind, she played the song of Koyee Mai—a song of a girl far from her village, a woman alone in the dark, a light that would guide her home.

She did not know how long passed as she played. She learned to guess time by the movements around her: the stars that wheeled above, the moon that spun, and the coming and going of bluefeathers from their corral. She had eleven copper coins before she lowered her flute.

When she returned to the Fat Philosopher and sat at her table, she gave the cook only one coin.

"I need no bed this night," she said. "I need only what food this can buy me."

She ate only mushroom stew that visit, and it left her still hungry, but she would not spend more.

"I know you're hungry, but we need to save our money, Eelani," she admonished her friend. "If we save enough, we can buy a warm cloak, sturdy boots, a fishing rod, and enough food to last the moon's walk back home."

As she left the tavern, she reached into her pocket and felt her ten remaining coins. They were not just money; they were a step to Oshy.

She slept in an alley beneath a refuse bin, trying to ignore the cockroaches she heard squeaking in the dark. She arose shivering in the cold, wet with rain and covered in mud, but light filled her heart. She had ten coins. Hope lived within her.

She returned to her corner and she played some more.

The stars turned.

The moon waned to a sliver, then disappeared, and darkness covered the city.

Koyee played on and on, eating little, sleeping less, collecting whatever coins people tossed her way. As she played, she thought of home, remembering her family, her hut, and the lights on the river. Sometimes when people walked by, Koyee looked up, imagining that one would be Okado, her long-lost brother. In her daydreams, he was a wealthy merchant or powerful soldier, and he always recognized her, even though ten years had gone by, and he always saved her from this life.

Yet it was never him . . . only a stranger, only somebody to walk by, to ignore her, to sometimes toss her a copper. And so she played on.

She made her music, shrinking into a skinny and weary thing, until fifty coins finally jangled in her pocket.

"We have enough," she whispered, running her fingers among them and listening to the jingle. "One more song and we can go home."

Tears stung her eyes, and she was about to say more when a yawn stretched across her. She stretched, shedding dust. When she lay down in the alley to sleep, curling up beneath the trash bin, she smiled softly; this would be her last sleep in Pahmey.

A beetle scuttled by, and Koyee didn't even reach out to grab it; her belly was still warm with mushroom stew. Rain

pattered down, and the stench of refuse wafted, but Koyee could already smell the cooking crayfish, crackling fires, and fur beds of her home.

"We survived, Eelani," she whispered, her cheek on her palms, lying on her side upon the cobblestones. "We are survivors."

Sleep took her and she dreamed.

She was fishing again in the river, the lights of Oshy on the water, her father with her in the boat. She was clean and warm and her belly was full, and she felt safe and happy.

"Pull in the net!" her father said and smiled. "It's heavy with crayfish. We will feast."

She smiled back at him . . . then gasped.

Suddenly he was not her father, only a pile of smoking bones, bits of charred flesh still clinging to them. She no longer sat in her boat, but in a wheelbarrow in the light of dusk.

"Koyee Mai . . ." whispered a voice.

She spun around and her heart froze. She saw him there.

The Timandrian.

"Koyee," he said, one eye green, the other black. "We are hungry. Your coins are mine. We must feed!"

He reached into her pocket with a sun-bronzed hand, rummaging, seeking, tugging her coins free. They spilled across the floor.

"Let go!" she said and writhed, pushing his hand away, but he kept digging in her pocket. "Stop!"

She opened her eyes.

In the shadows, two large Elorian eyes gleamed, bright blue and narrowed.

A child hissed, baring crooked teeth, and turned away. Coins spilled from his grip. Rags fluttering in the wind, the child ran.

Koyee leaped to her feet. She gasped. She was back in the alley in Pahmey, dirty and hungry. When she reached into her pocket, she found her coins gone.

"Thief!" she shouted.

Koyee ran.

She burst out of the alley. In the wide street, a shadow darted around the bluefeather corral, the tavern, and the slumbering soothsayer.

"Thief, come back!" Koyee cried and ran in pursuit.

She had not left Bluefeather Corner in almost a moon's turn, but now she ran across the streets. The shadow raced between two shops, scurried up a wall, and darted across the roof. Koyee followed, grabbed the wall, and began to climb, sticking her fingers between the bricks. She had not climbed in a long time, and she fell hard, banging her hip. With a curse, she rose and climbed again.

When she reached the rooftop, she saw the figure running down the opposite street. Koyee tottered across the tiles, leaped, and thudded onto an awning. She rolled down to the street, landed on the cobblestones, and ran again.

"Come back!" she shouted.

The thief raced ahead, a child half her size, clad in only a sack. A single coin fell from his grip. Koyee didn't even kneel to grab it; she had to save the rest of her treasure, a gleaming hoard of fifty coins, enough to bring her home.

She raced, panting, her chest aching. The long moons in Pahmey had weakened her, but she ran on. People bustled about, and she shoved her way between them. She had always been a huntress; she would hunt here too. The child vanished around a corner, and she followed.

She grinned as she ran. She was getting closer.

"I will catch you!" she shouted.

The child spun around.

He tossed something. It flew her way.

She cursed. It was a chain, a clay ball attached to each end.

The snare slammed into her feet, wrapped around her legs, and Koyee fell.

She hit the ground with a force that knocked the air from her lungs. Stars burst across her vision.

She tried to rise but could not. Pain flared through her. Blood seeped from her nose and elbows. She could only close her eyes, lie on the street, and struggle to breathe.

A crowd gathered around her, and hands helped free her legs from the snare. When Koyee could stand again, she found herself among a hundred people asking questions, offering aid, and dabbing her blood with their handkerchiefs.

She stood on tiptoes, looked over their shoulders, and lowered her head.

The thief was gone.

Koyee returned to her street corner bloodied, bruised, and penniless.

Moving stiffly, blood trickling down her arm, she raised her flute. She kept playing.

She stared ahead. She played for a long time.

The bluefeathers came and went, the bowls of stew were refilled and emptied, and slowly she collected her coins again. She no longer placed them in her pocket. In her alley by the bin, she found a loose cobblestone, and she dug there with a spoon the Fat Philosopher had let her keep. Beneath the dirt and stone, she placed her little treasure.

The moon waxed. Five coins grew to ten, then fifteen, and soon she had forty coins and counting.

"Soon we can go home," she whispered, barely able to remember Oshy, but still seeing her village in her dreams.

After another long, wearisome performance, Koyee stepped back into her alley. She pried off her loose cobblestone, added new copper coins to her treasure, and sealed the hollow.

"Let us sleep, Eelani," she said, rubbing her shoulder. "I'm too tired to even buy food. When we wake up, we'll buy what we need for the journey home." Her eyes stung. "We'll buy so much food, Eelani. Dried fish, salted meat, mushrooms, and a sturdy leather pack to hold it all. We're going *home*."

Eelani crept down her arm, raising goose bumps, and Koyee held her invisible friend in her hands.

"Do you remember home, Eelani?" she whispered, and her tears streamed. "Do you remember how the lanterns would swing over the Inaro, casting light on the water? Do you remember the taste of crayfish, and the warmth of our bed—a real bed with furs, not just an alley by the trash?" Her voice shook. "Do you remember Father's grave? We have to protect that home. We'll protect it with our sword, you and I. Like Father did."

She curled up on the ground, laid her head upon her secret cobblestone, and pulled her knees to her chest. With a soft smile, she closed her eyes.

Before sleep could claim her, pain blazed across her scalp.

Her eyes snapped open.

She tried to scream, and a callused hand covered her mouth.

Kneeling above her, drooling and pulling her hair, was Snaggletooth.

"So . . . we meet again, Scar Girl," he said, his drool splashing onto her face. He licked his single, purple-stained tooth. "You ran from Snaggletooth, but you can never hide from him."

She screamed into his palm. She tried to bite his hand, but his fingers held her jaw shut. She flailed and kicked, but he pressed a knee into her side, driving the breath out of her.

"You've been playing for coins," he said, his scraggly hair dangling like entrails. "Snaggletooth wants coins! Snaggletooth needs to buy his spice. Where are they? Where?"

One hand firmly on her mouth, his knees pinning her down, he reached into her pocket. He rifled around as she flailed. Even through the soot covering his face, Koyee saw his skin redden.

"Where are your coins? Snaggletooth wants them. Scar Girl was playing for money. Where is Snaggletooth's money?"

He released her mouth.

Koyee screamed.

Snaggletooth hissed, eyes bugging out. He slapped her face, cutting her scream short. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her wildly. She kicked, driving her knee into his belly, but he only grunted and would not release her.

"Where are your coins?" he shouted, saliva spraying.

Koyee reached for her katana. She grabbed the hilt and drew a foot of steel. Before she could finish drawing her blade, Snaggletooth raised a knife.

She drew her sword.

He placed his blade against her throat.

Koyee froze.

Snaggletooth grinned, his rotting gums gleaming in the moonlight. "Drop your sword . . . or I cut your throat."

She stared into his eyes. She saw the madness there. She dropped her sword.

"Good . . . good, Scar Girl." He pressed his blade closer against her, nicking her skin. "Now . . . hand me your coins. All of them! Quickly! You are hiding them somewhere. Pay for your life!"

She whispered, wincing as her bobbing throat moved against his blade. "I don't—"

"No talking! Money. Pay!" He moved the blade a hair's width farther, slicing just a bit of skin. "Pay Snaggletooth. Good Scar Girl."

Koyee wanted to keep fighting. She wanted to try to grab his arm, push his knife aside, and lift her sword.

But she also didn't want to die in this alley, filthy and thin and so far from home.

She nodded, pulled the secret cobblestone loose, and revealed her hidden treasure.

Snaggletooth's eyes, already buggy and bloodshot, protruded farther, seeming ready to pop from his head. Keeping one hand on Koyee's throat, he reached into the hole.

"Coins, coins!" he cried and laughed, face twisted into a maniacal mask. "Snaggletooth has them. Snaggletooth is rich!"

Like a beast digging for truffles, he tugged the coins out and stuffed them into his pockets, cackling all the while. With his treasure claimed, he finally released Koyee, shoving her against the wall.

"Keep playing, Scar Girl!" he said. "Snaggletooth will be back for more."

With that, he bolted out of the alley and ran.

Again Koyee chased a thief through the night.

Again she found herself rushing through a crowd, weary and dizzy and bleeding.

Finally, after what seemed like a hundred streets, she fell to her knees, held her scratched neck, and lowered her head.

He was gone.

"I'm sorry, Eelani," she whispered, eyes burning. "I'm sorry."

She walked back, head lowered, shoulders stooped.

She placed herself on the same street corner.

She pulled out her flute, and she played again.

* * * * *

Koyee liked to think herself a strong woman, a huntress and survivor and warrior. Through hunger, theft, and misery, she had not cried. And yet when the Moon of Xen Qae rose, she could not stop a tear from falling.

"It is our moon," she whispered, standing in an alley and staring between the awnings. "The moon of my empire, of my village, of my family."

The full moon shone down upon her, the largest moon of the year. Upon its craggy surface, many claimed they saw the face of Xen Qae, a wise philosopher who had lived five thousand years ago, father of the Qaelin nation. When the great, glowing face was at its largest—only once a year—they said the old master looked down upon Eloria, blessing it with his wisdom.

Koyee hugged herself. "Do you remember, Eelani, the Moon of Xen Qae back home in Oshy?" When her tear touched her lips, she smiled. "Remember how we'd build sky lanterns of lichen-paper, place candles in them, and let them fly into the sky? I wonder if any of them glided to Pahmey."

Eelani embraced her cheek, saying nothing as always; she didn't need to. Her warmth was enough.

"I miss him, Eelani," Koyee whispered, and now her voice was choked. "I miss home and I miss Father. I miss those sky lanterns and the song of the river. I miss a world where I was not always so afraid, so alone." She looked up at the moon. "Please, Xen Qae, watch over Eelani and me . . . and watch over Eloria."

Did anyone in Pahmey even know of the wise man? Did anyone in this city of dirt, jewels, hunger, and glittering lights care to worship a humble old teacher? Shivering in the cold night, Koyee pattered toward the edge of the alley. She had been spending most of her time in the shadows, a bedraggled urchin, not daring to emerge into the wider, cobbled boulevards where

the decent folk walked. And yet now in this moonlight, she peered out into a wide street lined with shops and houses, seeking a hint of peace, a whisper of home.

Her eyes widened.

"Look, Eelani!" she whispered.

Fresh tears budded in her eyes.

Hundreds of people were walking down the street, slow and silent—maybe thousands. They wore white silks, and they bore silken lanterns in which candles burned. The moonlight fell upon them. Soon they began to sing, a low and peaceful chant. Koyee stood listening, smiling through her tears. They sang the song of an ancient teacher living in the wilderness, worshiping the moon, a humble philosopher who now shone above. One by one, they released their lanterns, letting them float upward, past the roofs, and into the starry sky. Thousands of small lights glowed above, stinging Koyee's eyes and reminding her of home.

"We are Eloria," they sang. "We are the night."

A towering figure emerged around a street corner. Koyee looked and gasped. A great doll moved there, held aloft with poles and strings; it towered above the houses and buildings. Silken strands formed its beard, hair, and tufted eyebrows. White clay formed its face, a face like the moon. Robes swayed across its brass body. As the effigy of Xen Qae moved down the street, the people of Pahmey sang louder, and Koyee laughed.

"Do you see him, Eelani? Do you see?" The giant doll walked by her, moving farther down the street. "Not all is bad in this city. Not all is dark and lonely. Light shines here too, not just the bright lights of the hilltop, but the light of old stories and dreams."

As if to confirm her thoughts, a wagon trundled down the street, drawn by two men. Koyee gasped to see it, and a smile spread across her face.

"Look, Eelani. Fireworks."

The slim rockets filled the wagon, painted with swirls of gold, purple, and blue. Cones topped them, painted with faces of dragons, wolves, birds, and smiling philosophers. When the men carried their wagon past the alley, Koyee took a deep breath. Filth covered her, her fur was a grimy mess, and her hair lay in tangles. She felt ashamed to emerge from the shadows, but this was the Festival of Xen Qae, and so—dirty and scrawny like a starved creature—Koyee stepped out of the alley. She moved among the people, watching the wagon trundle toward a cobbled square between bronze statues of dragons.

The first rocket blasted upward with a wake of green smoke. It whizzed toward the moon and exploded with a shower of golden sparks. Three more fireworks followed, blue and silver, blasting out like the sunlit trees Koyee had seen from the Nighttower. Across the city, she heard more explosions and glimpsed a hundred more fireworks covering the sky. The people of Pahmey stared upward, singing to the moon and lights. Perhaps all across Qaelin, the greatest empire in Eloria, people sang and prayed.

Koyee approached a three-story building of stone and glass. She stepped into another alley, climbed the wall, and emerged onto the tiled roof. The fireworks blasted ahead of her, filling the sky with a million beads of light, a painting all in gold and blue and green.

She sat upon the tiles, pulled her knees to her chest, and leaned against a chimney.

"It's beautiful, Eelani," she whispered.

She smiled softly and felt her friend nuzzle her neck. For the first time in many turns, she felt some peace, some hope, some joy. The lights covered the sky, and Koyee stayed upon the roof, watching the fireworks and moon for a long time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
THE WOLF PACK

They raced through the darkness, a dozen wolfriders, heading toward the lumbering herd.

The towering, shaggy creatures raised their horned heads. Their eyes gleamed in the moonlight, as large as dinner plates. For a moment the stonebeasts only stared, confused. As the danger registered, they bugled cries of fear, a sound like wobbling saws that rolled across the plains. They turned to flee, hooves thundering and fur billowing.

Riding upon his nightwolf, Okado nocked an arrow. He snarled, prepared to kill.

As a child, a fisherman's son in a backwater, Okado had often pitied the crayfish they boiled. He had been weak. Since then, he had crushed that pity. He was a hunter now, a killer, a leader; no compassion filled his heart. He roared as he rode toward the stonebeasts, these hills of flesh that could feed a hundred people. Their horns were long, their hooves wide, their muscles rippling. Their teeth, which could grind rocks for moisture, could easily grind bone too. Yet Okado only growled, for he was a warrior, and no fear could fill his heart.

"Chanku Pack!" he shouted, leaned forward in the saddle, and tugged back his bowstring. "Ride!"

The herd wailed, galloping across the plains. Despite their girth—each stonebeast was large as a boat—they moved as fast as nightwolves. Okado's own nightwolf, a great black animal named Refir, ran beneath him, fangs white and eyes blazing in the dark. At his sides, hundreds of other warriors rode their own wolves,

shouting battle cries. They held their own bows, and katanas hung across their backs.

"Fire your arrows!" Okado shouted. "Claim our prizes."

He released his bowstring.

His arrow sailed through the darkness. A hundred others followed from his fellow riders. The projectiles slammed into the fleeing animals. Three stonebeasts yowled, tumbled, and crashed onto the rocky plain.

"Fire!" Okado nocked another arrow and kept riding. "Take them down."

Already tasting the bloody meat, he shot again. A hundred more arrows flew through the night. More stonebeasts mewled and fell, raising clouds of dust. The wolfriders flanked the herd from three sides; the beasts ran in a panic, stumbling over one another, arrows slamming into them.

Okado kept racing alongside them through the dust, firing arrow after arrow, picking out all the animals he could. The carcasses covered the plains, blood dampening their fur. With every beast he slew, Okado's blood burned hotter.

The herd only traveled here twice a year, migrating from the Inaro River south across the plains, heading toward the sea, where they would breed. Only twice a year could Okado hunt them, and they would keep his pack alive. The flesh of each beast would feed many families. Their bones would form the skeletons of huts. Their furs would become clothes, their tendons would become ropes, and their fat would burn in their campfires. Not a part would be discarded; they were beings of life.

Okado shot another arrow, hitting a young animal—this one was barely larger than his wolf—and sent it tumbling down.

Finally, once a hundred carcasses covered the plains, the stonebeasts realized escape was impossible. They turned together like a school of fish and came charging toward the wolfriders.

Thousands of them, their horns long as swords, raced toward Okado. Their hooves raised storms of dust, and their eyes blazed.

Okado fired another arrow, hitting one in the eye. His wolfriders scattered, raced upon the hills, then descended upon the herd from its flanks. More stonebeasts fell. More hope for food, fur, and a future spilled across the plains in crimson puddles.

"That's a hunt!" Okado shouted when two hundred stonebeasts lay dead.

Breathing heavily, he lowered his bow and slowed his wolf down to a walk. Upon the hills and plains, his fellow riders lowered their own weapons. The herd's survivors kept running, heading south, until the thousands passed them by, and the thunder of hooves faded into the distance.

Upon a hilltop, Okado tugged the reins and Refir halted. The nightwolf—a shaggy beast thrice a man's size—panted, tongue lolling. Foam dripped between his fangs, each one long as a dagger. Okado dismounted, placed a hand in Refir's thick black fur, and stroked him.

"You ran well, my brother," he said. "You ran with the spirit of a true warrior."

The wolf gave Okado a deep look, his eyes—the size of human fists—gleaming like liquid gold. Refir was the beta of their pack. Only one wolf stood taller: an old brown alpha that reigned back in their camp, a scarred canine who'd run on many hunts.

"But soon, Refir, *we* will be the alphas," Okado said. "You were only the runt of the litter when I found you, shivering and cold in the dark; even your mother would not nurse you. I was only the son of a fisherman, born in a soft village. Yet we became strong. We will both rise. Our time nears."

A high voice rose behind him.

"Still dreaming of dominion, my mate?"

Okado turned to see her there. Smiling crookedly, Suntai rode uphill upon a white nightwolf. A tall and slender woman, she wore silvery furs and bore two katanas across her back. Bone pins held up her hair, and tattoos of lightning raced across her cheeks. Her eyes shone indigo flecked with gold.

"And what of you?" he said. "You are my mate. I chose you because I thought you were strong; the women say you are the finest warrior among them. Don't you dream of ruling this pack too?" He snorted. "Are you weak?"

Suntai brought her nightwolf up toward him, dismounted, and touched his cheek. The moonlight shone on her white hair. "I dream of the day we return to our birthright, to the city that banished us, to our ancestral home. I dream of the crystal towers of Pahmey. I will gladly serve as an omega, scouring pots and skinning fur, to live in those fair towers again."

Okado grunted. He had no memory of Pahmey; he had never seen the city of crystal and glass and light. Few in the Chanku Pack had, but their blood flowed from its founders. Their ancestors had ruled the towers and walls, and now their descendants roamed the plains, a herd of hunters in the darkness.

And I am from a village, Okado thought. *My blood smells of crayfish.* He clutched his katana's hilt. *But my heart is the heart of a wolf. All will see my worth.*

"You will see the crystal city again," he said. "I will conquer it for you, Suntai. I will slay their guardians, bless the towers with their blood, and serve you their hearts. Our alpha is weak. He will lead us deeper into darkness. But I am strong. I vow to you by the howl of wolves: I will rise, and I will take you home."

They loaded the hunted stonebeasts onto great, flat wagons of many wheels. Men dismounted and tugged the wagons with ropes, for nightwolves were creatures of battle and hunting, never beasts of burden. Okado and Suntai rode before the procession, his wolf black and burly and male, hers white and lithe and

female—a beta couple whose pups Okado hoped would someday rule. They rode across the darkness of Eloria, the moon and stars bright above, the horizons black. No mushrooms grew in this wasteland. No truffles could be found in this rocky earth, and no rivers of fish flowed in the night. It was the harsh land of their banishment, the wastelands of the endless darkness.

As he rode ahead of the hunters, Okado looked to the northwest. He saw only a black horizon, the fish constellation above it. But he knew that it lay there beyond the plains. Oshy. His humble home. His lowborn shame.

"You would be proud of me now, Father," he whispered—too softly for Suntai to hear, for she would scorn him for this weakness. "I still remember you, Koyee, my sister."

He wondered if he'd even recognize Koyee now. She had been only a child when he'd left Oshy, but she would be sixteen now, ten years his junior but already a woman. Did she still fish in the river with Father? Was she a huntress too? Had she taken a husband?

Many times Okado had wished to ride across the plains, to find his old village, to scoop his sister up onto his wolf and save her from poverty. He had left long ago, when he'd been only an angry youth. Now he was a warrior, a tall and strong man, a commander in a great clan of thousands. He could ride a nightwolf, lead hunts, and mate with the fair Suntai, but one thing he could not do: return home. His vows of pride and strength kept him here; the wolfriders of Chanku had no homes, no outside blood, and no life but the pack.

When I joined this clan, I left my past behind.

And yet whenever he rode here, he stared at the horizon, at that leaping fish constellation . . . and he remembered.

They moved across the plains, dragging their hunted, until the moon sank. Finally they crested a hill and beheld the camp of the Chanku Pack.

The crater sprawled across the land, as large as a city, a sunken bowl in the earth. Elders whispered that thousands of years ago, a great boulder had fallen from the sky, slamming this hole into the plains. Before then, said the elders, the world would turn. Dawn would race across the land, and the sun would follow, brighter than a thousand moons. Trees would cover Eloria, flourishing in the light, and every hourglass turn the sun would sink, and night would chill the land until the sun reemerged. When the boulder had struck, the world fell still, they said. Now the sun stayed in Timandra and forever darkness covered Eloria, and forever life here would be a struggle in the dark, a hunt for hope.

Stories, Okado thought, riding downhill. *Stories for children, not warriors.*

Their tents filled the crater below, made of fur and leather. Thousands of people moved between them—children scampering on bare feet, elders leaning on canes, and mothers nursing babes. Thousands of warriors filled the camp too, dour men and women astride nightwolves—the fabled riders of Chanku. Their scaled armor glimmered in the moonlight, and moonstars adorned their shields; though banished from their city, they were still proud warriors of the Qaelin nation. Katanas and spears hung across their backs, and helmets shaped as wolves topped their heads.

As they entered the crater, dragging the stonebeasts, the hunters raised their voices in triumph. The rest of the pack greeted them with cheers. Warriors nodded in satisfaction. Children ran alongside the procession, jabbing the hunted animals with toy spears. Women began to build fires from blocks of hardened fat. Men dragged the animals off the wagons; the stonebeasts thumped to the ground, and at once knives thrust, peeling fur from flesh, cutting bones from joints. The people sang as they prepared the animals; this was a great gift for the whole pack.

As Okado rode through the camp, the people smiled, but he frowned. He looked at Suntai who rode beside him on her white wolf.

"This meat will feed us for a while," he said. "Yet the pack has grown large. This crater is too crowded. We cannot thrive in the wilderness forever, not as our women keep birthing healthy, hungry babes who grow into healthy, hungry warriors." He looked down at Suntai's flat belly, and he imagined his own child growing there someday. "We need the Inaro River and its treasures. We need the caves of mushrooms. We need to return to our birthright—to rule Pahmey again."

Suntai gazed toward the tallest tent in the crater, its fur walls painted with wolves, its silver posts topped with golden claws. In a crater full of humble leather tents, this was the closest thing the pack had to a mansion.

"Our alpha must decide," Suntai said, "if the time of our return has come."

Bitterness twisted her words. Deep fires kindled in her eyes, and her fingers coiled around the hilts of her swords. Okado understood. Suntai's parents had once dwelled in this tent, ruling this pack. The cruel hunter Yorashi had slain them in battle, claiming their title of alpha. Suntai—a mere child then—had tried to fight Yorashi, only for the brute to slap her face, laugh at her pain, and send her fleeing.

I will avenge your parents, Suntai. Okado stared at the fine abode. For many years he had feared the tent of his master. But now he was strong—strong enough to claim this tent for himself.

"Yorashi has weakened," he said and spat. "He is an old fool. He no longer hunts with us. He can no longer aim an arrow or swing a sword." Okado snorted. "Even now, he cowers in his tent like an old woman. But you and I, Suntai . . . we are strong. We are hunters. Come, we will enjoy the meat of our victory and drink the fresh, hot blood."

He turned away from the tent to see men, their bare chests glistening, cleaving the hunted beasts. Skewers drove into slabs. When they hoisted the meat atop fires of burning tallow, the rich scents filled the air. Juices spilled to sizzle in the flames. Some of the meat would be eaten this turn; most would be dried, smoked, salted, and stored for the moons ahead. Okado had not eaten since leaving on the hunt, and his belly grumbled and his mouth watered. He walked toward a fire. The meat was barely cooked—the insides would still be bloody—but Okado had always enjoyed the taste of blood, a primal taste of power. He drove his dagger into a slab of roasting meat, carving a portion.

Before he could eat, a deep voice rose from behind him.

"Meat time! Make way. I will have my first cut."

Bile filled Okado's mouth. Even the scent of cooking meat turned sour in his nostrils. A growl rose deep in his throat. Eyes narrowed, he turned around to see Yorashi, the leader of the pack.

Alpha Yorashi was tall and broad, among the largest riders in their camp. Muscles rippled across his pale, scarred body. He wore the furs of fallen alpha wolves: a loincloth, leather boots, a rich black cloak, and a hood shaped from a wolf's head, teeth still attached. A string of wolf claws hung around his neck, and he bore two katanas, their hilts wrapped in black fur. His hair hung long, thick, and white across his shoulders, and a bushy white mustache covered his lip. His nightwolf walked at his side, six feet at the withers, scars running through his brown fur. The beast drooled, ready for the feast; Felsan was his name, the alpha of the nightwolves and father to many, including Okado's own mount.

As alpha rider and wolf walked through the camp, the others bowed their heads and backed off, creating a path. The pair walked slowly, heads raised, snapping their teeth at anyone who ventured too near. Once near the meat, their nostrils flared; rider and wolf seemed as one, a two-headed god of the night. All bowed before them.

All but Okado.

He stood before the meat he'd hunted. He would not kneel in the dust. He would not bow his head. Wolf at his side, Okado stared at his master, chin raised. His growl rose, a sound like rumbling thunder before a storm. He met his alpha's stare and refused to look away.

"We missed you at the hunt," Okado said, and his hands formed fists at his sides. "The blood flowed red, the arrows flew like lightning, and the pack tore into the herd with glory. I led them. This is my prize."

Okado tore off a steaming slab of meat. The rich smell filled his nostrils and made his mouth water. He brought the meat close to his teeth and paused, waiting to see how the alpha would react.

He is weak, Okado thought. *He is old. He is afraid. We will see how he takes this challenge.*

Yorashi came to stand before him. His eyes blazed, digging into Okado. His wolf snarled. Fangs like blades shone in the firelight, and drool dripped from the beast's maw to steam against the ground.

"Step aside, beta," Yorashi said, his voice a deep rasp. "You will eat once I'm done."

Okado would not back down. He stared back steadily, meat in hand. He remembered the first time he had seen Yorashi; it had been ten years ago, when Okado had been only a youth running from his village. Back then, Yorashi had seemed a living mountain, a monster who could crush cities, his arms like battering rams.

But that was a long time ago, Okado thought. *I'm no longer a skinny youth.*

And Yorashi was older. Wrinkles spread out from his eyes. Hints of sagging showed upon his belly. The alpha was nearing

sixty years of age, an old man, and Okado was at the height of his strength.

And so I will test you, old man, he thought. *Every meal, I will test you for weakness.*

"I will eat first," Okado said. "It is my meat. It was my hunt. Stand back, Yorashi, and smell this food while I feast. You may eat when I am full."

Around the camp, the other riders sucked in their breath. Eyes glittered. Nightwolves howled. As a beta, it was Okado's task to challenge his leader; if an alpha could not dominate, he did not deserve his title. Yet never had Okado challenged their alpha like this, refusing him the right of First Meat. He narrowed his eyes and growled again, staring at his leader, and raised the meat closer to his lips.

Back down, old man, he thought. *Back down and watch me feast, or prove your worth.*

The meat touched his teeth. Okado paused, not chewing, staring, waiting. The challenge had been made; Yorashi would face it . . . or cower and forever lose his title.

For an instant, the alpha only stared back, his face reddening. His eyes blazed. His face twisted into a mask of bloodlust. At his side, his wolf snapped his teeth at Okado. Then both man and beast, alpha rider and his mount, tossed back their heads and howled to the moon.

Okado sank his teeth into the meat. The juices filled his mouth, fatty and rich and intoxicating.

With a roar, Yorashi swiped his hand, knocking the slab out of Okado's grip. The meat sailed through the air and thumped onto the ground, spraying juices.

Okado barked a laugh. "You still have some fight in you, old man."

The alpha grunted, grabbed Okado, and shoved him aside. Okado snapped his teeth but stepped back willingly, allowing his alpha access to the roasting meat.

But I will not forever stand aside, he thought, staring as his alpha settled down at the carcass to feast. *Next hunt, perhaps I will leave you only bones and skin.*

This hunt, his alpha had stared him down, had shoved him aside, had risked a fight to regain his title. But every year, the alpha grew weaker and Okado grew stronger.

My time to rule draws near. Okado grinned, licked his lips, and watched the old man feast. The poor fisherman's son would rise. The scrawny youth who had fled his village would lead the pack.

Finally Yorashi had eaten his share and returned, lips bloodied, to his tent. With his wolf, Okado settled down to eat. Their teeth sank into the meat. The meal tasted of blood and dominion.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THE GREEN GEODE

Koyee stood, barefoot and gray with grime, playing her flute. Her hair hung around her face, caked with dirt. Her fur tunic lay in tatters across her. She felt too thin, too weak to play—she had not eaten or slept in an hourglass turn—and yet she played on.

I will not give up, she thought, playing "Sailing Alone" over and over, the only music she knew. *I will keep making music for Eloria. For my home.*

A good crowd walked here this session. A young couple, their faces glowing with new love, tossed her a coin each. Koyee gazed at them, envying their clean skin, fine silk clothes, and companionship, but only smiled in gratitude. A young girl ran from her mother, gave Koyee two copper coins, then blushed and ran off. Many other people walked by. The night was warm, the moon was full, and coins gathered around Koyee's feet.

Yet will I only lose them again next time I sleep? she wondered. *Will more urchins steal them, or will Snaggletooth return?*

She did not know how long she'd been lingering here, a filthy busker. Sometimes she worried this would be her life.

As her fingers moved across her flute, she noticed that one man had been watching her for a long time. Most folk paused for a moment, tossed a coin, and walked on. This man had been standing still, arms folded, simply staring.

Flute in mouth, she stared back, narrowing her eyes. The man seemed about fifty years old. He wore flowing green silks lined with fur, the fabric embroidered with silver snakes. A string of sapphires hung around his neck, and his fingernails were

painted blue. His mustache was long and drooping, and he wore a small golden cap upon a bald head. He seemed wealthy to Koyee, but in a garish way like some foppish sorcerer.

She kept playing, and people kept walking by, and the man still stared—not humming along, not paying a coin, and never removing his eyes from her. Finally, after what seemed an hourglass turn, Koyee lowered her flute. Trying to ignore the strange man, she began walking down the street, heading toward the Fat Philosopher for a bowl of mushroom stew.

"Girl."

The voice was soft and smooth, the sound of silk rustling against silk. And yet it floated across the street and into her ears, rising above all other sounds. She turned and saw the colorful man staring at her.

"Girl," he repeated. "You play well."

She paused, her body still facing the tavern, her head looking over her shoulder at him.

"I'm *awful*," she said. "But I'm also hungry, so I play."

He stepped closer, eyes narrowing. When he reached her, he thrust his face close and tilted his head.

"You have scars on your face," he said.

She looked away. His words cut her and her eyes burned. Fire seemed to fill her throat. She did not mind her scars—she had never cared for beauty—but how dare he so casually mention them?

"What concern of yours is my face?" she said and began walking away. "Farewell, stranger."

He walked alongside her, hands folded into his flowing sleeves. "I beg your pardon, young woman. Please forgive me. Allow me to buy you a meal. I would very much like to speak with you."

She snorted. "I am scarred, I am filthy, and I am thinner than a rail. If you seek a female friend, I suggest you go uptown where they wear silks and jewels."

He kept walking alongside her, nodding. "Would you like to play uptown? You too could wear silks and jewels."

She stopped and spun toward him. "What do you want? Who are you?"

He bowed his head. "My name is Nukari. I am a purveyor of beauty. I seek beauty in song and in form."

"Then keep walking, Nukari, for my playing is awful and my face is worse."

He smiled, revealing very small and sharp-looking teeth. "Both can be improved, my child. Your technique is clumsy, but your soul shines. Your face is scarred, but it's still fair, young, and fresh, and your eyes are large and bright."

She rolled those eyes. "Thank you for your compliments, Master. Goodbye."

She left him there, entered the Fat Philosopher, and sat at her table. Nukari followed her inside and sat at a table of his own. Glowering, Koyee ordered a bowl of reishi mushrooms and ate silently, ignoring him.

"Don't look at him, Eelani," she muttered between mouthfuls. "That man is no good. I don't trust his snakelike voice."

Delicious scents filled her nostrils, and the cook approached, carrying a tray with a small feast. He began to place dishes down on Koyee's table—a bowl of fried fish, a goblet of gravy, a slab of fowl, and a pile of steamed clams. She stared at him, frowning.

"What are these?" she asked. "You know I cannot pay for more than stew."

The cook gestured at the far table. "The master in green ordered them you, Koyee Mai. Enjoy them."

She glanced across the room and saw Nukari there. He was busy sipping from a laquerware bowl, not looking her way. Koyee pushed the plates aside.

"I don't—" she began, but the cook had already left.

Koyee glanced at the food. She didn't want this gift. Not from this strange man. But her belly growled, her mouth watered, and before she could stop herself, she was feasting. Fish crunched in her mouth, juices ran down her chin, and warmth spread through her belly. She had needed this—badly. She didn't even pause from eating when Nukari approached, pulled back a chair, and sat across from her.

"The Fat Philosopher," he said, looking around. "The walls are humble clay. There is no music to entertain the guests. The cook is fat and slovenly. This is no place for folk to eat."

Koyee scarfed down a clam. "The food is cheap here, and it's hot and filling."

He lifted a greasy mushroom then placed it down, lips curling in disgust. "There is more to life than that, my child. Life is about beauty. About savoring every note, every flavor, every smile of a pretty woman. I own an establishment myself, but not a humble tavern like this. Do you know what a pleasure den is?"

She swallowed, wiped the back of her mouth, and glared across her plate.

"So you sell *hintan* to its addicts," she said. She remembered Snaggletooth—frail, mad, with but a single tooth left—and shuddered. "I've seen the spicers on the streets, their teeth purple, their eyes wild. How many of them did you create?"

He leaned back and smiled. "Ah, but the sweet pipe spice is only one pleasure I sell. I own the Green Geode, a place of fine food, fine companionship, and fine entertainment. Do you know who the yezyani are?"

She gulped wine, holding the mug with both hands, then slammed it down onto the table.

"I've seen their painted faces," she said. "They look like dolls to me. Nothing but painted clay dolls."

He nodded. "And I pull their strings. They dance for my guests. They sing. They flirt and laugh and tell tales of long ago. And they live a life of comfort. I give them silks and jewels and warm beds. Young child, come with me to my Green Geode. I will bathe you, clothe you in finery, and give you a room and a bed and hot meals. Play your flute for my guests. Be one of my yezyani."

She snorted and reached for a fried fish. "Did you not hear me play? Did you not say I was ugly and scarred?"

He reached for a fish himself. While Koyee bolted down hers, he only nibbled.

"I am as a gemcutter. I seek gems in the rough. And I polish them. You sit here, covered in dirt, skinny and clad in rags. But I see your shine. I want to polish you. I want to make you my jewel. Become my yezyana, and you will eat fine, warm meals—meals more lavish and delectable than this place serves."

Koyee finished the last clam, raised the plate to her mouth, and began licking the sauce.

"I'm not going to dance for anyone like a doll," she said between licks. "And I'm not serving spice to anyone. And I'm not singing."

He reached over, lowered the plate, and smiled at her.

"You will only play your flute, I promise. Come with me. You will glow like a gem."

She wiped gravy off her chin, stared at him, and narrowed her eyes. He was serious. He truly wanted her to work for him.

Koyee swallowed and her insides trembled. She stared at her plate. After so long . . . so many miles walked, seeking work in smithies, butcher shops, smelters, and a hundred other workshops, she was offered a job?

We can have a roof over our heads, Eelani, she thought, transferring the words silently to her friend. She knew Eelani could hear. *We can have a warm bed every night. And most importantly, we'll have safety. We'll have a place to store our coins without fearing the Dust Face Ghosts, Snaggletooth, or anyone else.*

She looked back at Nukari.

"How much will you pay me?"

"How much do you earn now?" he asked pleasantly.

"Twenty copper coins every standard hourglass turn," she lied, doubling the true amount.

"Then I will pay you thirty," he said.

Koyee struggled not to gasp. Thirty copper coins a turn! It was a fortune. It was more money than she had ever imagined earning. It took all her will to keep her voice steady.

"And I want free room and board," she said. "Three meals a turn. A room of my own; no other yezyani sharing it."

He smiled thinly. "These things will be yours."

She nearly lost her breath. Her heart fluttered. She'd have enough coins by the new moon. She tilted her head, squinted, and examined Nukari. A small voice inside her cried out that this was too good to be true, that she couldn't trust this man with the painted nails and gaudy silks. Her weariness, homesickness, and the rancid smell of her old tunic drowned that voice.

"Take me to the Green Geode," she said, rising from her seat. "You have a new yezyana."

They left the tavern. They walked along the streets, a man wearing finery and a woman clad in rags and filth. They walked for a long time.

For moons now Koyee had lived in the squalor of Pahmey's lower streets, the hive of beggars, buskers, and bottom feeders that nestled against the city walls. For the first time since the elders had spurned her, Koyee found herself climbing the city's hill, heading into the wide streets of the wealthy.

No dirt covered the cobblestones of these boulevards. Poles lined them, bearing lanterns that cast green, golden, and blue lights. Houses were not built of opaque glass, but of crystals that shone, reflecting the city lights. Steeples soared toward the moon, chanting rose from temples, and gardens of mushrooms flourished on balconies. Just as many people walked the streets, but they were cleaner, better dressed, and better fed than the folk of the city dregs. Powder and paint covered their faces, not grime. Well-fed bellies pressed against their silks rather than ribs pressing against naked skin. They wandered the streets, laughed in crystal pleasure dens, and gossiped in public bathhouses. Music rose from a columned theater, and Koyee glimpsed dancers and acrobats before Nukari walked onward, leading her by the hand.

"Come quickly, child," he said.

Koyee dragged behind him, eyes wide. She wanted to gaze through so many windows—to see how the wealthy lived, how they laughed, bathed, applauded dancers and singers, how they lived with joy and cleanliness and full bellies. But Nukari kept pulling her along, allowing her only glimpses of each building they passed.

"Slow down!" she said. "Let go of my hand."

He only smiled and led her along faster. "You'll have time to explore these streets, child, but not like this. Not clad in rags and covered in filth. You do not wish to embarrass me, do you? First I will polish you. When you are a shining gem, you may accompany me—and other men—to all the dens, theaters, and bathhouses of these streets."

Koyee grumbled as they went along. Embarrass him? She looked down at her body. Sticking out from her tattered tunic, her legs were thin as sticks. Grime covered her feet, so thick it looked like shoes. She was used to her own smell now, but she imagined it wasn't too pleasant to those accustomed to soaps and perfumes. She sighed and walked on.

If Timandrians attack this city too, no fineries will matter, she thought, gazing around at the wealth of Pahmey's hilltop. *If we cannot stop their threat, all the singers, jewels, and perfumes in Pahmey will fall into the fire.*

They walked past a towering jewelry store, three stories tall. Its glass windows revealed dozens of people moving up and down coiling staircases, examining the jewels, each one worth more than all in Oshy. By a bronze statue of a dancer, Koyee saw a humble stone building. Nukari turned toward it.

Koyee tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. All other buildings here were grand, their large windows proudly displaying their wares, be it jewels, dancers, singers, or wine. This place was different. Its windows were small and round, the glass smoky and green, hiding the insides. Aside from the bronze statue outside, nothing here denoted wealth or welcome. Had Nukari not been guiding her, Koyee would have walked past the building, not even seeing it through the shadows.

"Welcome," Nukari said, "to the Green Geode."

Koyee squinted at the squat building. "I don't even see a sign."

Nukari smiled thinly. "My patrons do not need a sign. We do not proclaim our wares in the light. My patrons prefer shadows. Come now, child. Enter your new home."

As she walked toward the door, Koyee tightened her lips.

This will not become my home, she thought. *This will only be a place to stay until I earn enough money to leave Pahmey. My home is Oshy, and it always will be. I will return.*

Nukari opened a bronze door, gestured into the shadows, and let her enter first. Koyee stepped into the Green Geode . . . and gasped.

She now understood the pleasure den's name. While the building's outward facade was craggy stone, its insides gleamed with crystals and green light. Koyee squinted, nearly blinded.

Candles burned upon a score of stone tables. A hundred lanterns hung from the ceiling, glowing all shades of green. Crystals grew along the walls, ceilings, and floor.

But more than its lanterns and crystals, Koyee gasped to see the people who filled the Green Geode. Several young women stood upon stages, clad in flowing silks, their faces painted green and silver. Two women were dancing upon one stage, swaying like spirits of the sky, their scarves billowing like clouds. A tall, beautiful woman stood on a second stage, playing a harp and singing a sad tune; a tiara topped her head, shaped as Shenlai the dragon, and her eyes gleamed like molten gold. Upon a third stage, a short, slim woman was performing with marionettes; she had an impish face with large ears, winking green eyes, and a crooked smile, and as her puppets performed, she supplied voices in alternating falsetto and grumbles.

Koyee blushed to see these stages. She had never seen women like these, their faces painted, their jewels glowing blue and white, their flimsy outfits showing more skin than they hid. Even the impish puppeteer wore only scanty silks that Koyee would feel naked in.

"They're yezyani," she whispered to Eelani. "They're trained to pleasure—to sing, to dance, to giggle at jokes."

She had sometimes seen old, wealthy men wandering the streets of Pahmey, their hair thinning and their wrinkles deepening, while pure and young yezyani—beautiful spirits wearing jewels—accompanied them to theaters and balls. Koyee swallowed. Was this her fate now?

She lowered her gaze. While the yezyani made her blush, the patrons of the Green Geode made her heart sink. They lay upon beds, watching the performers and smoking hookahs. The spice bubbled inside the glass containers, a deep purple, while green smoke swirled from the pipes. The scents filled the air, thick as syrup. The smokers didn't even turn to see Koyee enter; they

barely seemed able to focus on the yezyani. Their eyes were narrowed to crescent slits, and their mouths mimicked the shape, curved into half-smiles of pleasure and stupor.

I left the dregs of Pahmey, Koyee thought, *and entered a den of debauchery and spice. These patrons are no better than Snaggletooth.*

She turned to leave.

"This is not a place for me," she said. "Goodbye, Nukari."

She stepped toward the doorway, meaning to exit, but he blocked her way.

"Move!" she told him.

He only smiled pleasantly and bowed his head. "Forgive me, my child. I perhaps did not prepare you for the lights, the smoke, and the scents. Please. Stay with us here."

He closed the door behind him and locked it.

Koyee placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I will not wear those silks." She gestured at the dancing women. "I demand something more . . . proper."

He played with one of his many rings, spinning it around his finger. "I have closets full of robes and gowns. You may choose the dress you like."

She stared at the smoking, languorous men upon the beds. "And I will not serve *hintan*. I will not step near these men. I will not accompany them to balls, or giggle at their jokes, or flirt with them, or do anything else they might want. I will play my flute, same as I did on the street, and that is all." She narrowed her eyes and glared at Nukari. "If you refuse, you better move away from that door, or I will carve my way out with my sword."

For a heartbeat, his eyes narrowed and his lips twisted into a snarl. His expression softened so fast Koyee wondered if she'd imagined it, and again he smiled pleasantly.

"It will be as you wish. Now come upstairs; we will scrub you clean and dress you in whatever fashion you desire. Unless, of

course, you wish to keep your fur tunic. That I must insist you change out of." He gave a short, brittle laugh.

He took her up a stone stairway, and they entered a hallway lined with doors. Candles burned on the walls, and those doors that were open revealed beds topped with fur.

"Every yezyana at the Green Geode has her own room," Nukari said. "No other pleasure den treats its yezyani so well. Here you will be as a princess."

He led her into a tiled chamber. A bath stood here upon clawed feet. Soaps, towels, and brushes stood on several tables. At the back of the room, a closet stood open, revealing a hundred silken gowns. Hot and cold water filled cauldrons, and a mirror hung from a wall.

"I will be downstairs entertaining my patrons," Nukari said. "Take your time here. Come downstairs a polished gem. Scrub your skin until it's red. Remove the smell of the dregs. Toss your fur tunic into the fire and choose a new dress. Brush all the tangles from your hair and splash perfume onto your body. When you come back down, if I can recognize you, I will send you back up. You walked upstairs a filthy urchin. Step downstairs a yezyana."

With that, he left her in the chamber.

As soon as he was gone, Koyee let out a groan, rolled her eyes, and raised her hands in exasperation.

"By the moonlight, Eelani! That man is like some . . . some garish cockroach. I don't trust him. Do you?" She shuddered. "And I don't trust those men downstairs. But then again . . . the dregs had Snaggletooth and other thieves. Here we'll get our own room." She looked around her and sighed. "What do you think, Eelani? Should we stay here? Just for a little bit? Or should we flee out the window and run back to our old corner?"

She looked at the window; it was ajar, revealing a view of the city towers. She looked back at the bath, the fine silks, and the soaps and brushes. A long sigh ran through her.

"Oh, all right, Eelani. We'll stay long enough to bathe and find new clothes." She covered her nose. "You stink and you need the bath. But once we're clean and fed and clothed, if Nukari tries anything funny, we run."

She reached out her hand, letting Eelani crawl down her arm and nestle in her palm. Biting her lip, she stripped off her tunic, stepped toward the tub, and placed a single toe in. The water was warm and soapy. Koyee placed one foot in, then the other, and finally sank into the tub. She let out a long sigh.

"Eelani, finally you'll smell nice," she said, the water turning gray around her.

She scrubbed herself until her skin turned red, leaving the tub a muddy mess, then stepped toward the closet. A few moments later, she looked into the mirror and barely recognized herself.

"Look at us, Eelani," she whispered.

For the first time in moons, no grime covered her and she could see her pale skin. Her hair flowed smooth, tangle free, and milky white. She had chosen a gown of black silk, fitted but not revealing, its fabric embroidered with silver fish; it reminded her of the river at home. She had cleaned her katana too and hung it across her back; its hilt peered over her shoulder, wrapped in blue silk.

"If not for the scars across my face, I'd think myself almost presentable." She bit her lip and raised her eyebrows. "You still look the same, Eelani." She blew out her breath, flapping her lips. "I guess we'll have to wear this disguise for a while. We'll have to be a yezyana just until we have enough money. I promise you: We will not forget our home."

She stepped downstairs, made her way through clouds of green smoke, and found Nukari mixing purple drinks at a bar. When he saw her, his face split into a grin that showed all his teeth—a crescent moon grin.

"My polished gem," he said and caressed her cheek—the scarred cheek. "My flawed jewel."

She glared at him. "My name is Koyee Mai."

He shook his head. "Koyee is the name of a fisherman's daughter from a backwater." He sniffed. "The name still stinks of fish. You will now be Madori Mai, a maiden of the Green Geode. Go, there, stand on that stage. Play your flute for our dear patrons. Play well and you shall have a warm bed, a warm meal, and safety."

"And coins," she reminded him. "Thirty copper coins every hourglass turn."

He stared at her blankly for a heartbeat, then smiled again and nodded. "And coins. Go, my Madori Mai. Play your beautiful music, my beautiful gem."

She rolled her eyes. But she played her flute. Green smoke flowed around her, men lay drooling as they inhaled the spice, and the other yezyani performed around her. Koyee closed her eyes as she played, pretending that she still stood on her old street corner, the bluefeathers coming and going and the old fortune teller snoring. Strangely, even in her silks, she missed that old place.

A long time later, when she laid down her flute and stepped off her stage, the other yezyani came rushing toward her. They touched her face, ran their hands through her hair, and caressed her gown.

"Madori Mai! Madori Mai!" they said. "Where are you from? Where did you learn how to play? Such pretty hair. Such purple eyes! Madori Mai, where did you get your sword?"

Nukari came trundling toward them, scowling, and waved them aside.

"Back, back, little devils!" he said. "Give my Madori her rest. She is weary. Back onto your stages, silly things! Move your little backsides. Dance and play for our patrons."

Still waving them back, he led Koyee upstairs and along the hallway.

"You made me proud, my Madori," he said and placed a copper coin in her palm. "Here is your reward."

She tilted her head. "Nukari! You said thirty coppers."

He smiled. "You have earned thirty! I kept twenty-nine to pay for your gown. But when you play again, all thirty coppers will be yours. Now come! Here is your chamber for the night."

He all but shoved her into a small room; it was barely six feet wide. A bed lay against a wall, taking up half the room. Koyee was so weary—she had not slept in so long—that she didn't even care. This chamber was no larger than a closet, but it was better than Bluefeather Corner in the dregs. And it was *safe*.

"Nukari, I will eat before bed," she said. "Can you bring—"

She turned around just in time to see Nukari leave, closing the door behind him. A key twisted in the lock. Koyee grabbed the knob and twisted. The door was sealed.

"That sneaky snake!" she said. "Eelani, can you believe him? I knew you shouldn't have trusted him. You . . ."

A yawn interrupted her words. It flowed across her body from fingertips to toes, stretching her like a silk scarf in the wind. Weariness tugged her eyelids.

"We'll show him after we rest for a bit," she mumbled, climbed into her bed, and fell asleep at once. She dreamed of green smoke, snaggletooth grins, and slamming doors.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
THE DRUMS OF WAR

Bailey Berin stood upon the Watchtower, gripping the battlements.

"That stupid, stupid boy!" she said, eyes stinging. She gave her braids two vigorous tugs. "If he weren't already marching to his death, I'd kill him."

She stared east into the dusk, a land of barren trees, orange light, and shadows fading into the night. Jaw clenched, she spun around, marched across the tower top, and stared westward at the fields and pastures of Fairwool-by-Night. What she saw there scared her more than all the shadows of Eloria.

"Where has my village gone?" she whispered, her knuckles white as she clutched a merlon.

Five hundred people used to dwell here—tradesmen, shepherds, and farmers, working and living among fields, gardens, and swards. Looking down now, Bailey could no longer see grass or fields. She saw nothing but the might and wrath of Timandra. For two months the forces had been mustering here, and now they covered the land like a tapestry of hatred.

North of the river, the hosts of Arden spread, warriors of the raven. Tens of thousands marshaled here, standing in rows and rows, clad in breastplates and helmets. Archers, swordsmen, and pikemen all gathered around their lords. Their banners thudded in the wind, showing black ravens upon golden fields. The king stood at their lead upon a white courser, his armor pale and his sword bright in the sunlight. A thousand other horsemen stood behind him, each beast bedecked in steel and gold and black

wool. Along the mile-wide river, the fleet of Arden swayed, a hundred ships bearing more soldiers, more weapons, and enough food to feed the hosts for a year.

When Bailey looked south of the Sern, she saw the troops of another kingdom. Naya mustered there, her neighbor to the south. Its warriors wore tiger skins and hoods. Each man clutched two spears and wore a necklace of teeth. Elephants trumpeted among them, their tusks ringed with gold, archers upon their backs. Hundreds of tigers stood leashed, clawing the air, their trainers clutching whips. Burly, bare-chested men beat war drums, each as large as a wagon wheel, and howled for victory against the devils of the dark. Naya's banners too fluttered, hiding and revealing a tiger upon a black field.

"All across Timandra, the other kingdoms rally too," Bailey whispered, hands trembling around the battlements. "I left my village as spring bloomed, trying to stop a war. Now autumn covers the land, and the armies of daylight muster."

She looked north toward the distant forests, and she could imagine the warriors of Verilon among the pines, their warriors clad in furs, sitting astride bears and wielding great hammers. Farther north, the seafarers of Orida, warriors of the orca, would be sailing their galleys toward the shadows, their helmets horned and their beards golden. Far in the south, the desert warriors of Eseer would be moving east, riding camels and brandishing their curved blades, chanting for the victory of the sun.

"The day rises," Bailey said and shuddered. "The night will burn."

She scanned the armies below, seeking him. Somewhere down there among the multitudes, Torin—that foolish, winky-eyed boy—stood in armor, ready to invade with his king. Bailey couldn't even see him in the crowd, and she ground her teeth. A sigh rolled through her.

For a decade now, she had looked after the boy. Ten years ago he had come into her home a frightened orphan, a year younger than her and barely taller than her shoulders. She had pitied him then, begged her grandfather to take him in, and since then he'd been as a younger brother to her. And now . . . now he wanted to leave her, to march to war?

"You can't take care of yourself, Torin," she said down to the army. "I know you think you can. I know you think that, at eighteen, you're a man and a soldier, but you're not. You can't do these things."

Tears stung her eyes. She had always driven him hard, pushing him to swim faster, to climb higher, to run farther. And now he thought he could run alone. She couldn't let him do that.

Finally she saw him below, and her throat tightened. He sat astride a horse not far from the king. She barely recognized him, for a helmet hid his shock of dark hair. A checkered cloak of black and gold billowed behind him. He wore a breastplate, and more armor bedecked his horse. He looked like some knight, but Bailey knew he was only her Torin, only the gardener.

"You're not a soldier, Winky," she said down to him. "You are still too slow. Your bad eye still hampers your sword's aim. You are still my babyface, and I have to look after you."

She rubbed her stinging eyes with her fists, took a deep breath, and nodded. She knew what she had to do. It burned down her throat, shook her fingers, and blazed in her lungs, but she knew it had to be done. With a deep breath, she left the tower top and raced downstairs.

At the tower's ground floor lay the village armory—a single rack with a few swords, breastplates, and helmets. Lips pursed, Bailey grabbed her breastplate and strapped it on. It was not as fine as the armor the soldiers outside wore, but it fit her snugly and it would protect her. She grabbed a helmet from a peg, pulled it onto her head, and tightened the strap under her neck; it left her

face free and let her braids dangle down her chest. Finally she grabbed her sword, fastened it to her belt, and looked into the tall bronze mirror.

"Well, Bailey old girl," she said to her reflection. "For a year, you've guarded a village. Now you have to guard something a lot more difficult—Babyface Torin."

She gripped her hilt and left the tower.

While the fields and farms bustled with soldiers, the village square—a small expanse of cobblestones—seemed eerily deserted. A few chickens pecked in a corner, and a dog wandered around Old Maple. As Bailey walked toward her cottage, a lump filled her throat. Fairwool-by-Night had been the only home she'd known throughout her nineteen years.

When will I see this place again?

The lump growing, she reached her cottage, the largest one in the village. White clay filled the space between its timber foundations, and straw covered its roof. Three chimneys of red brick rose from the house, but only one was pumping smoke. Years ago, several people had lived here—her parents, her grandmother, and her uncles. Since the plague, only she, her dear old grandfather, and Torin had lived within these walls.

And now Torin and I are both leaving, she thought, eyes stinging.

She walked through the garden, moving between sunflowers, daisies, lilacs, and a dozen other flowers Torin had planted and nourished. When she stepped into her home, her eyes watered and she could barely take another step.

Her dear old grandpapa sat in an armchair by the fireplace, a book in his hands. He looked up at her with red, watery eyes.

"The fire burns," he said. "I could not stop it."

Bailey's heart twisted. She stepped toward him, leaned down, and kissed his cheek.

"You lead Fairwool-by-Night wisely," she whispered. "You could not have stopped a king's command."

He shook his hoary head. "I let violence flare here. I let those . . . those monks preach hatred." His fists clenched and trembled. "And now the armies gather here for war. Bailey . . . I already lost my children. I do not want to lose my grandchildren too."

Bailey could not stop her tears from falling. She embraced her grandfather.

"I will look after Torin," she whispered. "I have to go with him, Grandpapa. You understand, right? You know how he is. He runs too slowly. He cannot climb a tree without falling. He needs me to protect him." She held the old man's wrinkly hand. "But I will come back to you, I swear it. We both will. This war will end quickly, and we will sit by the fireplace again, all three of us. You will read us stories like you used to, and we will drink mulled wine, and things will be good again. I promise."

He reached out a trembling finger and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"And let him watch over you, Bailey. Yes, maybe he is clumsier and slower than you, but there is wisdom in him, and there is strength too, a strength of his own fashion. In the darkness, don't let your temper flare. Stay close to Torin and protect him . . . and let him protect you from the flames inside you."

She hugged him again and kissed his cheek, and when she left him in the house she could barely breathe.

Vision blurred, she was wandering across the village square when she heard the bickering.

"Give me that, Hem!" said a voice behind her. "Sheep droppings, there's still a bee on it."

"There is not! Give it back."

"Where do you even keep finding these things? By the light! You got your hands and shirt all sticky."

Groaning, Bailey turned to see Cam and Hem standing under the maple tree. The shorter Cam was holding a honeycomb out of reach; the tall, heavyset Hem was reaching for it and pleading for his treat.

"You two!" Bailey shouted. "Camlin! Hemstad! For pity's sake, stop fighting like two fussy little girls."

She marched forward, grabbed the honeycomb from Cam, and tossed it as far as she could; it sailed over the roofs of the houses.

Hem whined and watched it fly away. "I was eating that." The beefy baker's boy pouted, his cheeks turning pink.

Cam smirked, leaning on his shepherd's crook. "Good work, Bailey old girl, I—Ow!"

He winced and mewled as she clutched his ear.

"And you, Camlin Shepherd," she said, twisting his ear. "Stop torturing the boy and stealing his treats." With her other hand, she grabbed Hem's ear too, giving it a good twist. "Come with me, boys, and put on some armor. Don't you know there's a war starting?"

She began dragging them across the square by the ears. The two younger boys whined and moaned, but they trailed behind, unable to free themselves.

"Bailey!" Hem said. "I—Ow! I know there's a war, but what are we to do? Owww . . . stop twisting my ear!"

She kept tugging, dragged them toward the armory, and shoved them inside. She gave Hem a swift kick to the backside when he was too slow to enter.

"Suit up!" she shouted after them. "Armor and swords and helmets. Torin is riding into war, and we're going with him."

"But why?" rose Hem's whine from inside the tower. His head peeked out the doorway. "Why must—?"

"Get back in there!" Bailey placed a hand on his face and shoved him back inside. "No talking. Torin needs us. We're his friends. You know how useless he is in a fight. We had to save his backside the last battle, and we're going to save it in the next one. Go on, get your swords!"

Clanks, curses, and a whimper rose from the shadows. Finally the boys emerged. Cam, the smallest of the Village Guardians, looked like a child in his father's armor; his helmet wobbled, and his breastplate hung loose. Hem, meanwhile, couldn't even fit his helmet on; it sat perched upon his head, and his belly bulged from below his breastplate. Both wore swords and both were muttering curses. Honey still stained Hem's fingers.

"Bloody heroes you two are," Bailey said with a sad shake of her head. "Now come on. And walk straight." She cocked her head as horns blew outside the village. "That's the signal. The army is moving out. Let's find Torin before he's too far ahead."

They raced through the village, armor clanking and swords swinging on their belts. They emerged between two cottages . . . and beheld a sea of steel.

The army spread out as far as Bailey could see. Horses walked ahead, bearing lords clad in armor and finery. Banners flew in the wind and silver trumpets blared. Behind the cavalry marched thousands of troops—archers in cloaks of gold and black squares, infantrymen in pale steel, and pikemen bearing pole-arms that rose taller than the village houses. They trampled grass, farms, and Torin's riverside gardens. Behind them, Bailey could see the masts of warships sailing downriver; the Sern would take them into the night.

Behind a formation of archers and swordsmen, Bailey saw a swarm of Sailith monks; there must have been hundreds, and Bailey growled. They all wore the same yellow robes, and their hoods hid their faces. They were men of Arden but wouldn't even raise the raven banner. Instead they held their own standards:

yellow sunbursts upon blood-red fields. Countless soldiers were invading Eloria, trained killers, but these robed monks scared Bailey more than the rest combined.

Soldiers fight with blades and arrows, she thought. *Sailith monks fight with words. Their weapons are mightier.*

"Idar's beard," Cam muttered, staring at the army. "There're about a million soldiers here. Bailey, are you su—"

She grabbed his arm and tugged him along. "Yes! Now come on—quickly. Torin is riding ahead. Hem, you too. Stop fiddling with your belt and follow me."

As they raced alongside the marching infantry, their swords swinging and their armor clanking, Bailey felt her cheeks flush. They must have made quite a sight—three disheveled youths, their armor forged by a village smith between making forks and spoons. They were only the Village Guard, not true soldiers, but Bailey kept running, dragging the two boys behind her. She was perhaps not a soldier, but she had fought before, and she had slain a man.

I will fight bravely with you, Torin, she swore. *I do not believe in this war. But I believe in protecting you.*

They ran until they passed the footmen, archers, and pikemen, then ran alongside the horses. The lords of the host rode between them and the river, covered in steel from head to toe. Tunics of black and gold checkers covered them, and swords hung at their sides. The horses were as finely dressed and armored as the riders, noble beasts from stables across Arden.

Finally Bailey spotted Torin ahead. He wore a helmet, but the visor was raised. His cloak fluttered in the wind. He was staring ahead, face blank. Only a few horses away rode the king, Idar's half-sun upon his breastplate, his helmet shaped as a raven of gold and onyx.

"Winky!" she said, racing forward to run alongside him. "Winky, slow down your horse, or you're likely to fall off. Do you remember how you fell off the village pony a few years ago?"

He turned toward her and his eyes widened. "Bailey? What . . . what are you doing here?" He looked over her head, and his eyes widened even further. "Cam and Hem? You too? Go back to the village!"

Bailey shook her head fiercely, braids swinging. "We're coming with you, Babyface. I'm not letting you get into any trouble. With your bad eye, you'll probably stumble in the dark and drown in the river, if I'm not there to save you. I already had to save you from drowning twice, and that was here in daylight."

His face reddened, and he leaned down in his saddle. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Bailey, I told you. Don't embarrass me in front of the other soldiers."

She rolled her eyes, walking alongside his horse. "And I told you: You're not a soldier, you're a very silly boy." She looked over her shoulder. "Camlin! Hemstad! Catch up, will you? Stop get tangled up in the bushes."

The two boys emerged from brambles, cursing and slapping off burrs, and ran up beside her. Hem nearly tripped over his dangling sword, and Cam's helmet wobbled up and down, repeatedly blinding him.

Bailey noticed that the king had turned in his saddle and was watching them, his beaked visor raised. His eyes darkened and a sigh clanked his armor. Bailey stared into his eyes and raised her chin, daring him to defy her. She was perhaps a humble villager, but her father was the mayor, and her blood was highborn. If she wanted to fight on the front line, she would.

"I see you have your own personal guard, Torin Greenmoat," the king said, smiling wryly. "Keep them close. They'll look after you on the field. I hear young Bailey can swing a sword."

She gripped her hilt. "Your Highness, I hope I never have to use it."

The army marched on: the forces of Arden on the northern bank, all in steel; the ships along the river, their sails wide; and the Nayan warriors on the southern bank, leading their leashed tigers and banging their drums. When Bailey closed her eyes, she imagined that she could see all across the border, from the northern snowy islands to the southern deserts and savanna. All across Timandra, the sunlit half of Moth, the hosts stormed.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the dusk ahead.

The armies roared and increased speed, boots and hooves thudding. Horns trumpeted, drums beat, and banners flew. With a cry that shook the earth, they entered the shadows.

The invasion of Eloria began.

CHAPTER NINETEEN
IN THE WOLF'S JAW

The moon shone full when Yorashi, alpha of the Chanku Pack, summoned the council of riders.

They had left their elders, mothers, and cubs in the crater. Ten thousand warriors made for the mountain, each astride a nightwolf—the horde of Chanku in all its might, clad in armor and bearing their blades and arrows. Every year, as the wolf's constellation leaped overhead and the full moon shone, they rode to the mountain in all their gear of war. Every year they mustered to hear their alpha speak.

Only this year, Okado thought as he rode, *everything changes.*

His alpha rode ahead of him, clad in steel scales and a fur cloak, his weapons across his back. Okado rode behind the leader, and Suntai—his fellow beta—rode at his side, her chin raised and her lips locked in a snarl, mimicking the growls of the beast below her. Like him she wore steel scales and a wolf's head helmet. Like him she bore a katana, a dagger, a bow and arrows, and a shield emblazoned with a moonstar.

You are my mate, he thought. He looked at her, admiring the lightning tattoos on her cheeks, the golden flecks in her indigo eyes, and the curves of her strong, lithe body, the body of a warrior. *But soon you will be my queen rider.*

When Okado stared over his shoulder, he saw the Chanku Pack cover the mountainside, riding behind their leaders. For the first year since the Chanku warriors had been banished from Pahmey, forced to live feral in the wilderness, the pack numbered ten thousand riders. During three hundred years of exile, they had

grown from outcasts into an army. Their wolves growled, the moonlight lighting their fangs and red eyes. Upon their backs, riders held blades and bows, a horde grown too large for a humble crater, a horde that could sweep across Eloria. The omegas of the pack trailed behind, the older and weaker riders, but even an omega of Chanku was worth ten Pahmey soldiers.

"This will be my army," Okado whispered under his breath. "This horde will bring us glory. This horde will win back our birthright, the great city that should be ours."

He returned his eyes forward. The mountain loomed above them, glimmering black against the starry sky. Shaped as a wolf's head, the halved peak silently howled at the moon. Upon Wolfjaw Mountain the future of the pack would be sealed.

They climbed for a long time, warriors hungry for meat and blood and glory. They rode along old stone paths they had been treading for generations—since the first exiled warriors had come here for prayer. When finally they reached the mountaintop and stood between the great stone jaws, Okado looked north.

He saw it there upon the horizon, a distant patch of light like a fallen star.

"Pahmey," he whispered.

He had never been to that city. He had never seen it from any closer. In their exile, only here upon the mountain, standing between the stone jaws of the great wolf, could they see their distant homeland.

Suntai wheeled her wolf around and stood at his side. She stared at the horizon with him, eyes solemn, and the wind ruffled her long white hair.

"Our home," she whispered. "The home that was stolen from us."

Okado stared at the northern light. Suntai's ancestors had ruled Pahmey; she was descended from the Chanku nobles, great

warriors who had built and governed the city. Their blood ran through her veins, pure and strong.

My blood is lowborn, Okado thought. *I am from Oshy, a humble village. But that blood burns with fire. It made me strong. It made me stronger than all in this pack.*

The other riders climbed the mountainside, coming to gather around him. Soon all ten thousand gazed at their distant home. The wolf constellation shone above, the only time of the year it crested the zenith of the night. The full moon blessed them. And their council began.

Alpha Yorashi rode his wolf onto a towering boulder, a stone tongue that rose between the jaws of the mountaintop. He drew his katana and raised the blade. The moonlight shone against his scarred, leathery face.

"Chanku Pack!" he shouted. "I am Yorashi, son of Juntey. I am alpha! Hear my howl."

He tossed back his head and howled to the moon. His wolf answered the call, a deafening sound that pealed down the mountain. The entire clan shouted at the sky. Wolf fangs gleamed. Swords rose like a city of steel. The cries of the pack rolled across the landscape. It was a cry of honor, of courage, and of pain hammered into strength. Okado hoped that even in Pahmey, far upon the horizon, they heard the call . . . and feared it.

This is the cry of our banishment, he thought, *but also of our rebirth. This is the cry that will spell your doom, city of decadence.*

"This year our council is blessed," said Yorashi, sword still raised, his wolf upon the boulder. "We climbed the mountain with ten thousand warriors, the greatest our force has been."

The army roared again, brandishing their weapons. Ten thousand helmets, shaped as wolf heads, gleamed in the night. Ten thousand true wolves howled beneath them.

"We can let no crater contain us," said Yorashi. "We've grown too numerous, too strong. For too many years have we

lived in exile, huddled in our den of stone. Too long have we fed upon dwindling meat, depending on hunts that can no longer sustain us."

The warriors jeered. Okado snapped his teeth. Yorashi was speaking truth. The crater and the hunts had sustained the original exiles of Pahmey, but the pack had grown too large to live like this. They had grown too strong to cower in the darkness. He looked back toward the distant patch of light.

"It is time," Okado said, "to claim what is ours."

Yorashi's voice rose louder. "I, Alpha Yorashi, will lead you to glory! I will lead you to greater food—not only to meat, but to fish, to crab, to mushroom. The time to leave our crater has come!"

Okado leaned forward upon his wolf, gripping his sword and dagger. He could already imagine the heat of battle, his blades slicing into the elders of Pahmey, those decadent usurpers. He could already imagine living in their palaces, surrounded by the spoils of war.

"We will travel south!" cried Yorashi. "We will head toward the southern waters of Inaro, far from where the ships of Pahmey sail. We will grow mushrooms in the soft, wet soil. We will grow algae where moonlight hits water. We will fish in the river and we will grow plentiful. We will not have a mere crater in the rock, but a great civilization in the south. Chanku will rise!"

Okado frowned. Warriors mumbled around him. A few cursed.

Travel south? Okado gritted his teeth, scarcely believing his ears. Travel away from Pahmey? Become fishermen and farmers, the life he had fled?

He glanced over at Suntai and saw the same shock on her face. She was gaping at Yorashi, clutching her weapons in shaking fists.

With a grunt, Okado spurred his wolf. He rode toward the boulder and snapped his teeth up at Yorashi. Beneath him, his wolf bared his fangs.

"You will have us become fishermen?" he cried up at his alpha. "You will have us grow mushrooms like farmers? We are the Chanku Pack! We are warriors. We do not fish. We do not farm. We hunt for our meat. We take our food with sword and fang, not net and basket." He snorted, breath steaming.

Atop the boulder, Yorashi leaned down and glowered. His wolf, the scarred and shaggy beast Felsan, snarled down at Okado and snapped his teeth.

"Hunting is a sport for small packs," he spat, disgust filling his voice. "You cannot support an army by hunting on the plains, playing games of glory suited for lesser tribes. The stonebeasts you hunt migrate here too rarely." Yorashi raised his voice to a shout. "I will not lead a mere pack of hunters. I will lead a nation!"

Okado gave his wolf a quick jab of the heels. The beast reared and placed his paws against the boulder, growling up at the alpha.

"You sound like an old, tired elder of Pahmey, not a warrior." Okado spat. "When is the last time you fought a battle, Yorashi, or joined us on a hunt? When did you last prove your strength? Only the strong may rule the Chanku. I deem you weak."

Yorashi pointed his sword down at Okado; the blade nearly reached his eye. Okado stared up, daring not look away, flinch, or even blink.

"I speak," the alpha said, "as a leader of a great nation. Not as a brute leading a simple hunt. Children of Chanku can hunt; men *lead*. I speak wisdom, not blind fury. I am no angry, rash youth, beta."

Okado drew his own katana, swung it, and knocked his alpha's blade aside. Beneath their riders, the two wolves snapped

at each other, the alpha wolf upon the boulder, the beta below and ready to climb.

"Wisdom?" said Okado. "You speak as a tired old fool. We are warriors. You want mushrooms and fish instead of fresh red meat? Then we will fight for these prizes." He turned his head to address the crowd. "We will take them from Pahmey!"

The pack's eyes gleamed with approval. Okado knew that he had them. These were hard warriors, thirsty for battle and glory. Even the slimmest, youngest woman among them was stronger than any soldier of Pahmey. They wanted war, and Okado knew they would follow him.

Yorashi's wolf reared and clawed the air. Upon his back, Yorashi swung his blade, slicing the sky. His wolf dropped back to the boulder, his claws striking sparks against the rock.

"Pahmey has high walls!" said Yorashi. "We have no siege engines. Pahmey has thick gates, and we have no battering ram. Pahmey has three warships patrolling the river; we have none."

Okado barked a laugh. "So you *are* a coward. You fear the soft elders of Pahmey with their silks and powdered skin. But I am a true warrior. A true warrior does not fear a city fallen into decay. Our wolves can cross the river; they are strong and can swim fast against the current. The city gates?" He snorted. "We will tear through them like steel through leather. I am not afraid, Yorashi. Are you?"

Behind him, Okado heard the others mumble their agreement. Voices rose, calling Okado's name. But Okado would not turn to face them, not even his mate. He kept his eyes locked on Yorashi, refusing to blink first.

This old man ruled long enough, he thought. *His time has ended.*

The alpha's mustache bristled, his eyes blazed, and saliva flew between his teeth. Finally the old fire of youth rekindled in him, and his muscles bulged as he gripped his sword.

"You will not make this decision, boy. You joined this pack as a pup, and I groomed you, and I made you my beta, but you are still only a boy. You will obey me." He shouted at the warriors who covered the mountaintop. "We will travel sou—"

"We will not!" Okado said. "I will not obey you. Neither will the warriors behind me. South? Fishing? Farming? No. That is not Chanku. That is not the way of the wolf. Pahmey is our birthright! You are right, Yorashi. We are many now. We are too many to live in a crater. We will storm the city walls!" His shouts rolled across the mountain. "We will reclaim our homeland! The elders will die upon our blades. Their hearts will feed our wolves. We will rule the crystal city again, as our forebears did."

"*Our* forebears?" Yorashi spat down upon him; the glob hit Okado's wolf. "You are not one of us, pup. You are the son of a lowborn, filthy fisherman from a distant village. The pure blood of Chanku does not run through your veins. You are nothing. You are dust. Your blood stinks of crayfish."

The crowd hushed.

Okado stared, silent.

Yorashi smirked.

For years, nobody had dared speak of Okado's lowborn blood, not since he'd risen to the rank of beta. In the Chanku pack, strength and valor made a man, not blood; the pack welcomed all those who could prove their honor. To spit upon Okado's blood was the basest insult. It was an insult that meant Yorashi was grasping for his last weapon. It was an insult Okado could not overlook.

He stared at his master and spoke in a low voice, though he knew that all could hear him.

"Yorashi. When I was a boy, running from my village, you took me in. You taught me strength, honor, and valor. You taught me that the world is hard, cold, and dark, that the night is endless and full of danger. You taught me that in the eternal shadow of

Eloria, only strength can rule. You've treated me well, and for that I have served you, and for that I honor you." He raised his sword. "So I will live by your lessons—the truth that only strength can rule." He raised his voice. "Alpha Yorashi, by the ancient rites of our people, I challenge you to prove your strength. I challenge you to a battle of wolves."

Yorashi stared down at him, and for a moment—just a few heartbeats—all hatred, anger, and bravado left his face. Sadness filled his eyes.

He always knew this time would come, Okado thought. *The alpha who lingers too long will always face this fight.*

Yorashi himself had made this challenge to the previous alpha, Suntai's father; he had won that battle and gained his title. Thus for hundreds of years had the alphas of Chanku risen, each ruler slaying the one before him.

Yorashi looked down at Okado and spoke softly. "I've taught you well, Okado. But I will show you no mercy."

Okado raised his blade. "I neither will accept nor give any."

He tugged the reins and his wolf stepped back. Atop the boulder, Yorashi bellowed, spurred his mount, and leaped down with a swing of his sword.

Okado's wolf reared, and he swung his own katana. The two wolves slammed together, and the blades clashed with a shower of sparks.

The wolves broke apart, snapping their teeth, then crashed together again. Fangs bit and claws tore at flesh. Atop the beasts, the riders swung their blades again. Steel clashed and rang. All across the mountaintop, the other riders surrounded them, banging swords against shields. Their eyes swam around Okado as he fought, thousands of lights.

The two wolves, alpha and beta, broke apart again. A groove ran down Refir's cheek, and blood matted his black fur.

Yorashi's wolf too bled; blood dripped down his brown flanks. The two beasts circled each other, jaws wide and blood dripping.

"Slay the enemy, Refir!" Okado shouted and dug his heels into the wolf.

Refir leaped forward, claws lashing. His teeth sank into his enemy's shoulder. The brown wolf yowled, and atop his back, Yorashi swung his blade. Okado raised his shield, blocking the blow.

"Your time has ended, old man," Okado said. The two riders moved closer together, leaning in their saddles, their faces but a foot apart. "Chanku will not cower. We will rise."

They drew apart and the wolves lunged again.

Beast slammed against beast.

Blood splashed.

"Slay him, Refir!"

Beneath him, his mount—the great, powerful Refir, the second mightiest wolf in the pack—drove his fangs into his alpha's neck.

The brown wolf mewled.

The aging, scarred beast bucked and howled to the moon, then stumbled back upon his hind legs, almost a comical sight, as if the animal were imitating a drunken man.

Then, with a thud that made the pack gasp, Yorashi fell from his wolf. The old ruler, burly and scarred and huffing, hit the ground.

The crowd of riders whispered. To fall off one's wolf was the greatest shame for a warrior. Yorashi lay on the ground, eyes wide, hand still clutching his weapon. Bleeding, his wolf fled with his tail between his legs.

Okado brought his wolf to stand above the fallen rider. Refir placed a claw upon Yorashi's chest, pinning the man down. Yorashi stared up, tightened his lips, and closed his eyes.

"Do it," he said. "Make it quick. Tear out my throat and feed my heart to your wolf." Lying on the ground, he nodded. "I will have my blood flow within the veins of the pack."

Refir growled down at the fallen man, his jaws dripping saliva, his eyes narrowed and red. With a grunt, Okado dismounted the beast. He grabbed Yorashi and tugged him to his feet.

"Stand up," he said. "I will not have my wolf slay you. I will not have any doubt my strength." He stepped back and sliced the air. "We will face each other on equal footing."

Their swords clashed again.

They fought, moving in circles, blades whirring, alpha and beta, the two greatest warriors of their pack. Yorashi was aging, his face lined, his voice a rasp, but he still moved fast; he was still the greatest swordsman Okado had faced. The old man kept shuffling forward, slicing, parrying every attack, until his blade found Okado's arm and ripped off skin.

The pain only fueled Okado's anger. He roared and lashed forward, swinging his blade again and again. The people shouted around them. Swords clanged against shields. Blood dripped down Okado's arm, and still he fought, moving faster, and soon he was no longer retreating but stepping forward, step by step, pushing the old man back.

It was all Yorashi could do to parry. Finally, with a great cry to the night, Okado leaped into the air, and his sword slammed down with the might of falling stars. His blade drove through his enemy's shield, cleaving the steel, and severed Yorashi's forearm.

Blood sprayed through the night. The arm and cloven shield tumbled through the air. Rather than clutch the stump, Yorashi raised his sword. He stared forward and hissed, blood spilling.

The battle froze.

Okado stood, facing his mutilated enemy.

"Leave," he said.

Yorashi spat and raised his sword higher. "You will have to kill me, boy. Fight me and slay me."

"No." Okado shook his head. "I will not slay you as you slew my mate's parents. You've weakened, but once you were strong. Once you took me into your pack and you taught me to fight. I still have some honor, Yorashi, even if you've lost yours." He pointed his blade southward. "Go to the southern lands that you crave. Go and find your fish and your mushrooms. But go alone. You were a great warrior once. Leave without your arm . . . but with your pride."

The crowd had fallen silent around them. Not a breath sounded, and even the nightwolves stared intently.

Okado stood waiting, sword pointing south.

I don't want to kill you, old man. But if you linger, I will. I will.

Yorashi sheathed his sword. He grabbed his belt and pulled it free. Never removing his eyes from Okado, the old man wrapped his belt around his stump and squeezed. The flowing blood slowed to a trickle.

The wounded man nodded once, then turned to leave.

The pack parted, wolves and riders forming a path. Yorashi walked down the mountainside into the endless, cold night.

Okado remained upon the mountaintop, standing still. All around, his pack stared up at him, silent. Still not a breath stirred.

Finally one rider—a tall woman with one eye, the sides of her head shaven—broke the silence.

"Alpha." She bowed her head and her wolf knelt beneath her.

A second warrior, this one a bald, bare-chested man, spoke too.

"Alpha."

His wolf knelt beneath him, and the warrior lowered his head.

"Alpha," said another.

"Alpha."

The word swept through the crowd. All the wolfriders, warriors of Chanku, bowed before the new ruler of the pack.

Suntai looked upon him, his mate of years, the brave and noble woman who had hunted at his side, who had loved him through his storms of struggle and now his triumph. She sat tall upon her white wolf, and her eyes gleamed.

"Alpha," she whispered and bowed her head.

Before her wolf could kneel, Okado approached and held the beast's chin, keeping the animal standing. He climbed upon his own wolf, the shaggy Refir, and turned so his saddle pressed up against Suntai's. He looked upon his mate, reached out, and held her arm.

"Alpha," he said to her.

They turned together to gaze upon their pack. The riders sprawled across the mountaintop, kneeling.

I wish you could see me now, Father, Okado thought, his throat tight. *I wish you were here, Koyee, my sister.*

He raised his bloodied blade and roared to his pack.

"I am Okado! I am Alpha!"

The mountain shook with a great howl. All roared to the sky.

"Okado! Okado!"

He shouted above them all. "I will lead you out of banishment! I will lead you to our homeland. We will take Pahmey. We are the night!"

Their roars rolled across the land, and this time Okado was sure the distant patch of light heard . . . and feared them.

CHAPTER TWENTY
FIRE IN THE DARK

As Torin rode his horse into the dusk, his belly twisted and his throat tightened.

"I never wanted this," he whispered. "I never wanted to fight, only to save Bailey . . . and now she too is here."

Nobody could hear him over the roars of the army. Men shouted for blood. Drums beat and trumpets blared. Thousands of hooves beat against the dust, and thousands of boots thumped. They marched through the shadows, trampling the last blades of grass, and emerged into a barren land.

No plants lived here in the eternal darkness. The moon shone overhead and the stars dotted the black sky. The rocky plains flowed into the horizon, rising into distant mountains. Only the river broke the blackness, a strand of silver in the moonlight. A few miles away, beneath the Nighttower, nestled the village. It looked no larger than Fairwool-by-Night, only a few huts and lanterns rising along the riverbank.

For a few heartbeats, the soldiers of Timandra froze. Mumbles of awe rose among the troops. Men pointed at the stars. Some cursed, others laughed, while a few prayed. Horses whinnied. The soldiers stood still, daring not advance farther. Torin had entered this land thrice already, and still it chilled him. He shivered and had to look down, for the endless sky of lights seemed so large, so distant, that it spun his head.

Ahead of the troops, King Ceranor raised his sword.

"Men, light your torches!" he shouted. "Fear no darkness. We will light the night!"

All across the army, a hundred thousand torches crackled to life, a second sky of lights. Smoke plumed and sparks filled the air. The smell of fire rose in Torin's nostrils, and strangely, it reminded him of his childhood roasting sausages around campfires.

A white horse galloped by, and Torin's spirits sank even deeper. A grimace tugged his face. Atop the stallion sat Ferius, his yellow robes flapping. The monk raised a torch and shrieked, spraying saliva.

"For the light of Timandra! Take their village. Slay the demons of the dark!"

With roars that rang across the land, the army raced forward.

They had crossed the dusk at a quick march, but now they ran and roared for victory.

They raced down the hillside, a swarm of torches, swords, and arrows. Horses galloped ahead. The ground troops raced behind. Chariots trundled and banners flapped and everywhere men shouted. Torin gripped his reins and galloped with the rest of the cavalry. He bounced in the saddle, nearly fell, and clung on. The world rose and fell around him and the roars nearly deafened him.

"Torin!" Bailey shouted. "Don't get ahead, damn you!"

She ran alongside him, jumped up, and tried to grab his saddle.

"Bailey, let go!" he said, appalled. "You're going to get trampled here."

Running between the horses, she growled up at him. Her arms pumped. Torin was forced to slow his gallop to match her stride. The rest of the cavalry thundered all around, raising dust, nearly trampling the young woman.

"Idar's beard!" he cursed, reached down, and grabbed Bailey's arm. He tugged, she leaped, and soon she sat behind him in the saddle.

"I told you!" she shouted as they kept riding, clouds of dust rising around them. "I have to look after you."

"Bailey, you nearly got trampled to death! I'm the one looking after you so far."

She gripped him from behind.

"Now gallop, we're falling behind." She pointed ahead at the rest of the horses. "Ferius is there, and I don't trust him. Go, go!"

Torin leaned forward, dug his heels into the horse, and the beast ran faster. They followed the rest of the cavalry, the lands rising and falling all around. Thousands of troops ran around them, waving their weapons and chanting for blood. The village grew larger ahead, lights like stars; there couldn't have been more than thirty huts. A dozen boats swayed at the docks, their masts topped with lanterns.

As they drew nearer, a horde that covered the landscape, Elorians emerged from their homes. They pointed, shouted, and bustled like ants from a disturbed hive.

"These are not warriors," Torin whispered. "They're holding fishing rods and tools."

Nobody heard him. All around the soldiers roared, swords flashed, and horses thundered. The smoke of torches covered the sky, crimson and black.

"Take their town!" the king cried somewhere ahead. "Archers, take out their defenders."

Torin looked around, grimacing. A thousand archers pulled their bowstrings. A thousand arrows filled the night, their tips lit with the torchlight. Whistles filled the air. Elorians screamed and fell, pierced with the projectiles.

"He's murdering them!" Bailey said, sitting behind Torin in the saddle. She wrapped her arms so tightly around him he could barely breathe. "Those are just . . . just villagers."

Torin gritted his teeth and spurred his horse. Ahead, the first lines of cavalry charged into the village. Knights on horseback roared, swung their swords, and cut Elorians apart. A few of the villagers began to flee. They raced across the landscapes; arrows tore them down.

"Your Highness!" Torin shouted, riding through smoke, seeking the king. Finally he saw the man ahead, his torch reflecting against his raven helmet. Torin tugged the reins, directing his horse toward the monarch. He found himself riding through the village, the huts blurring at his sides. Boats were burning in the river to his right.

"Your Highness, please!" Torin shouted, riding toward the king.

Smoke filled his eyes and mouth. Torin coughed. A scream rose. He waved the smoke aside to see an Elorian racing his way.

Torin tugged the reins and his horse reared. The Elorian screamed ahead, white hair wild, eyes wide. For an instant, Torin thought it might be the Elorian girl he had seen, the one with the scarred face. But no—this Elorian seemed older, a woman with pale skin clutching a humble knife. Children cowered behind her against a hut, weeping. With a scream, the Elorian ran toward Torin, knife slashing.

The horse whinnied. The blade sparked across its armor.

Torin clung to the saddle. His horse's hooves hit the ground. Torin raised his sword above the Elorian, but couldn't bring himself to land the blow.

She stared at him, eyes wide.

"Run," he said to her. "Run from this village. Take your children and r—"

With a flutter of yellow robes, Ferius rode by. The monk grinned, swung a mace, and clubbed the woman's head.

Torin stared, heart freezing, as the woman fell the ground, her skull caved in. With a flash of armor, knights on horseback thundered by, swords swung, and when Torin could see again, the mother's children lay cut and trampled.

"Winky," Bailey whispered in the saddle and clung to him. "Oh Winky, they're killing them all."

Wincing, Torin led his horse around the corpses. Blood spilled across cobblestones. All around the village the army sprawled like a swarm of insects around a fallen fruit. Torin rode around a hut and saw the king ahead.

"Your Highness!" he shouted hoarsely, smoke in his throat. "These are no soldiers. The village is ours. We cannot butcher humble people. We—"

"They are nothing but creatures," interjected a voice. Ferius came riding between Torin and the king, smiling toothily. "And they are all already dead. There is nothing you can do to save your beloved monsters, boy." He smirked, clutching his bloodied mace. "This village is ours, and light shines in the darkness."

Torin looked around him, panting, and saw nothing but smoke, blood, soldiers, and bodies. The corpses lay everywhere—Elorians of pale skin and large eyes, their bodies pierced with arrows, swords, and spears. The huts and fishing boats burned. Fire lit the night.

A scream sounded behind him.

Bailey leaped from the saddle, ran forward, and lunged at Ferius. She screamed and swung her sword his way.

"Bailey!" Torin shouted.

Grunting, Ferius parried her blow with his mace. The blade rang and chipped.

"Bailey, no!" Torin jumped off his horse and pulled her back. "If you attack him, they'll imprison you again. Bailey, listen to me! They're already dead. We can't save them."

She was screaming and weeping, her face red, her eyes full of tears.

"I will kill you, Ferius!" she screamed as Torin pulled her back. "You will taste this steel!"

Vaguely, he was aware of Cam and Hem running up toward them. Their eyes were wide, their cheeks flushed. Torin still held Bailey. He began to pull her away, smoothing her hair and whispering into her ear.

"Come with me, Bailey. It's too late. Let's get out of this smoke."

He took her out of the village and they walked across the plains. All around them, soldiers chanted in victory. A few scattered bodies of Elorians, those who had fled the village, lay dead upon the rock, arrows in their backs. Torin and Bailey kept walking until they climbed a dark hill, rising from the mass of steel and smoke and fire.

"Oh, Winky," Bailey whispered, embraced him, and buried her face against his shoulder. "How has this happened?"

He stroked her hair, held her close, and stared down the hill. The armies of Timandra sprawled across the plains. Within the horde, like a great campfire, the village of Elorians burned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
THE DISTANT FIRE

The world could be burning, Koyee thought, but inside the Green Geode only light, laughter, and languor would swirl. She stood upon her little stage, barely more than a stone pedestal, playing the beautiful brass flute Nukari had given her. She could barely see through the green smoke that swirled before her, filling this chamber of crystals. All across the floor, the spicers lay sprawled upon mattresses, puffing on their hookahs. Purple *hintan* bubbled in glass vials, and the smoke formed dragons, warriors, and demons before dispersing into a cloud that forever hid the ceiling. A few men sometimes blinked, seemed to rise from stupor, and tossed a coin her way; most could only lie puffing and drooling.

Perhaps I too am in a land of forgetting here, Koyee thought. She had been here for so long already. She did not know how long. There were no hourglasses here; Nukari forbade them. Time did not flow within the Green Geode, only liquid spice and drool.

But I will soon escape, she thought as she played. Ever so slowly, her coins were piling up. Nukari took from her so much—for her gown, for her new flute, for her meals, and for her bed. Sometimes she thought he charged her for the spice fumes she breathed. Whenever she objected, he threatened to toss her back out into the street. And so she stayed. And so she still stood here, playing the same tune, again and again, coin by coin.

"Madori Mai!" said Lilika, the singer with the golden eyes, when Koyee was done playing. "Madori Mai, come upstairs, it's a full moon. Time for our Silver Festival."

The yezyana smiled. Blue paint coated her eyelids, and she wore a silk dress Koyee would have blushed to wear. She was tall and fair, the fairest of the yezyani, her skin pale and pure as moonlight, her hair dyed a gleaming gold. She wore a tiara shaped as Shenlai, the blue dragon of Qaelin, for she was queen among the yezyani, a beauty like a spirit from ancient tales.

"My name is Koyee," she said to the singer, feeling short and plain beside her, keenly aware of the scars that marred her face.

Lilika shook her head, covered her mouth, and giggled. "That is your outside name. Here you are Madori and I am Lilika. Come, upstairs!"

The other yezyani ran toward her, silks fluttering. Dancers, singers, and professional flirts, they all giggled and grabbed Koyee, tugging her off her stage and onto the stairway.

"Yezyani, yezyani!" shouted Nukari, running around the bar where he was mixing his liquid spice. "Back onto your stages. Move your little backsides!"

They only laughed and waved their hands at him.

"Go dance instead of us, Nukari!" one said, giggling.

The others squealed with joy. "Go, go, you are a beautiful woman!"

"It is the Silver Moon," said Lilika with a smile. "We yezyani celebrate now."

Nukari's face reddened, which only made the young women laugh louder. Confused, Koyee gasped as her fellow yezyani pulled her upstairs in a stream of flashing silks, sparkling jewels, and tinkling laughter.

They pulled her into Lilika's room, the largest of the upstairs chambers, for she was a first among them, and this room was her palace. Strings of crystals hung from the ceiling, and a great bed covered half the floor, large enough for ten people to sleep in. Koyee's heart raced. Why had they brought her here? Did

they have some . . . some cruel initiation to inflict upon her? Would they strike her, mock her, or force her to prove her loyalty—to swallow a live spider, shave her hair, or dance like a marionette? Koyee wanted to flee this room, feeling safer in the shroud of smoke downstairs.

Atana, the little puppeteer—an impish girl with large ears and gleaming green eyes—pulled glasses from a drawer. She grinned and filled them with spirits.

"Drink, Madori!" she said, handing her a cup. "Let us drink for the moon."

When Koyee looked outside the window, she could see the moon, full and silver and shining between crystal towers . . . and yet it glowed beyond iron bars. For all its light and laughter, Koyee thought the Green Geode little more than a prison.

When I have enough coins to leave, she thought, staring between the bars, *will I even find a way out?*

She thought of Oshy, wondering if the people there were gazing upon the same moon this night, celebrating its glow. She missed home.

Queen Lilika raised her glass. "To the moon!" she said. "To new friends. To the yezyani, bringers of joy and warmth in a world of darkness."

She drank solemnly. All around her, the other women fell silent and drank too. The spirits burned down Koyee's throat, pinched her nose, and warmed her belly. She wrinkled her nose and coughed, and the yezyani laughed.

After slamming down their glasses, the yezyani sat upon the great bed, pulled Koyee between them, and laughed and touched her hair.

"You never talk to us, Madori!" said Queen Lilika, playing with her golden hair. "Always you stand on your pedestal alone, then hurry upstairs like a nightwolf is biting your bottom. Always you hide in your little room. Tell us about you."

The other yezyani bounced up and down on the bed.

"Where are you from?" asked Atana. "Your accent is not of Pahmey." The puppeteer imitated Koyee, feigning a village accent. "I am Madori Mai. I play the flute. Leave me alone; I don't like to talk." She winked, grinned, then collapsed onto the bed in a fit of laughter.

Another yezyana reached out toward her cheek, and Koyee recoiled, sure that the girl would mock her scars, but the young dancer only said, "Your skin is so fair! You don't even need white paint."

Koyee's fear began to ease. There was no cruelty here. These yezyani were silly, but they would not torment her the way Longarm had in the graveyard. She smiled hesitantly, and when they poured her more spirits, she drank again.

"I'm from a small village named Oshy," she said. "I'm an orphan and moved to Pahmey after our village was attacked." She looked down into her cup. "Oshy is on the border of the day. A sunlit demon slew my father."

Her eyes watered, and when she blinked them, she saw the other yezyani's smiles vanish. They stared at her, eyes wide. Little Atana, barely larger than a child, covered her mouth. Tall and fair Lilika, wearing her dragon tiara, tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. They all stared silently.

"So it really exists?" whispered Atana, her mischievous smile gone. "A land covered in firelight, a realm where a great star burns in the sky, large as the moon and bright as lightning?" She trembled and covered her eyes.

Lilika pulled the petite puppeteer into an embrace. "Of course it's not real, Atana. There's no such place." She looked at Koyee as if admonishing her for frightening the girl. "Isn't that right, Madori?"

Koyee frowned and leaped off the bed, sending the others bouncing and falling over.

"Of course it's a real place!" Rage flared in her. "I lived right beside it. The demons of sunlight killed my father. As far as I know, they've killed more people since I left Oshy. There is a land that lies always in daylight, like in the old stories, and demons live there, demons of cruel eyes and . . ."

She let her words trail off. The yezyani were all staring at her, some afraid, a couple weeping, others shaking their heads in disbelief.

"I hope you never believe me," Koyee said. "I hope you always think it's just a legend. That means you are safe. Because if you ever learn the truth, if the Timandrians ever reach this city . . . we will burn in their fire."

Atana whimpered, but the others only rolled their eyes. One dancer, a smirking little thing with emerald eyes, mumbled something about Koyee being wrong in the head.

They are fools, Koyee thought, eyes burning and fists clenched. *This whole city is full of fools.*

With a huff, she left the chamber and stomped downstairs into the common room. She was too upset to sleep or eat; she would play her flute for more coins. The faster she earned money, the sooner she could buy enough food and supplies to leave Pahmey, to return to Oshy and defend it.

She stepped onto her pedestal, began to play her flute, and paused when the front door swung open. A gust of cold wind blew, fluttering the smoke. The spicers barely flinched, but Koyee shivered in the cold and stared. A man she did not recognize hobbled into the Green Geode. Bald and gaunt, he wore a merchant's blue silks, and even through the smoke of *hintan*, Koyee scented a faint hint of the river. She would recognize the scent of the Inaro River anywhere.

"Nukari!" the man shouted out. "Bring me a lot of spice. I'm shaken and need to forget. Oh by the moonlight . . ." He trembled, covered his eyes with his hand, and paced the room.

Koyee had seen many lost souls in the Green Geode—spurned lovers, grieving widowers, and failed gamblers. Most shuffled in, heads lowered and shoulders stooped. This man paced and trembled and wrung his hands. He was not dejected. He was afraid.

Already on edge from her conversation upstairs, Koyee sucked in her breath, and a single thought leaped into her mind: *He saw a Timandrian.*

Koyee had trembled the same way when she had seen one.

She lowered her flute, jumped off her pedestal, and made her way between the beds of hookah smokers. When she reached the man, he barely seemed to notice her. He was mumbling under his breath, and his fists clenched and unclenched.

"Are you hurt?" she asked him.

He looked her way, didn't seem to register her for a moment, then blinked. In addition to the river, she detected the faint scent of smoke, different from the smoke of the spice; this smelled like fire.

"It burned," he whispered, lips trembling and eyes wild. "The whole village burned, and . . . merciful moonlight, so many creatures around it, an army of light, and . . . I need my spice." He raised his voice and turned to the bar. "Nukari, bring me spice—"

Koyee grabbed his shoulders, spun him back toward her, and glared.

"What village?" she said. "What army?"

But she already knew the answer.

It pounded through her, shook her limbs, and constricted her throat.

"I sailed to Oshy with silks," he whispered. "Silks to trade for crayfish, that is all." He covered his eyes. "An army of sunfire, spilling from Dayside, so many they covered the world. I am mad. I think I am mad! Too much spice, too much spice, too many waking dreams . . ."

Oshy burns.

Koyee trembled.

My home. I couldn't save you. I'm so sorry.

"They will march here too," she whispered, knees shaking. "They will burn us. I must—"

A hand grabbed her arm, and a voice hissed into her ear. "You must play your flute, Madori Mai. You must never speak to our patrons."

She turned to see Nukari sneering at her, his eyebrows—painted green and purple—pushed down over angry eyes. His teeth shone in the lamplight.

Koyee wrenched herself free. "My village!" she blurted out, loud enough that even the hookah smokers looked up and winced. "I must go there now. Dayside attacks! I must save them. I—"

Nukari slapped her.

His hand blazed against her face, knocking her head sideways, and Koyee gasped. Pain bolted through her, light flashed, and she nearly fell.

"You will be silent!" he said. "You will not frighten our patrons, you filthy fisherman's daughter." He grabbed both her arms and began tugging her toward the staircase. "You will stay in your room until you learn respect."

Koyee roared, tugged mightily, but could not free herself.

"Release me!" she said. "Nukari, release me!"

He struck her again, a blow that rattled her jaw, and dragged her onto the staircase. His one hand held her arm; the other tugged her hair. She screamed and struggled, but couldn't free herself. He reached her room, shoved her inside, and she fell to the floor.

"You will stay here until you calm yourself!" he said.

She leaped up and raced to the door.

It slammed in her face, and the lock clicked.

Koyee yowled, slammed against the door, but only hurt her shoulder; the door was forged of bronze. She yanked at the knob again and again but couldn't free herself.

"Eelani, it's happening," she whispered and shook. "The Timandrians attack. They'll come here too. Maybe we can still save Oshy. Maybe some villagers lived."

She ran toward the window and tugged at the bars, but they wouldn't budge. She peered outside, seeking aid from someone—anyone—but the alleyway below was deserted. What could she do? Scream for help? Would Nukari only barge in here and gag her?

"We never should have come to this place," she said. "We never should have agreed to play here. We should have just . . . just run to Oshy, even if it took a full moon, even if we starved on the way. It would have been better than languishing here in a prison."

She found tears on her cheeks, rubbed them away, and stomped her feet.

"No, Eelani! No. Don't pity yourself. That won't help. I have a sword and I can fight. I will fight the Timandrians." She drew Sheytusung and watched the light glimmer against the blade. "I vow to you: Timandra will taste this steel."

She rushed back to the window bars, tugged them again, and then banged against the door. Neither would budge. With a groan, she fell onto the bed, lay on her back, and stared at the ceiling.

"We have to find a way out," she whispered. "What will we do, Eelani?"

Her shoulder spirit scampered onto her chest; Koyee felt the warmth nestle against her. She stroked her invisible friend. Without Eelani, she would have gone mad, she thought. It was good to have a friend, even if she were just an invisible one most folk claimed was imaginary.

"You've always been there for me, Eelani. You've always helped me. Maybe you can . . ."

Koyee froze.

She sat up.

A trembling smile touched her lips.

"Eelani!" she whispered. "You can go fetch the key. You know that Nukari keeps his keys in the blue bowl downstairs." She hopped off the bed, stepped toward the door, and lowered her hand to the ground. "Squeeze under the door, Eelani, and go downstairs. You're skinny enough to do it. Fetch me the key!"

She could swear she felt the faintest of flutters, a hint of warmth that raised goose bumps, as Eelani scampered down her arm, squeezed under the door, and raced off.

"Be quick," Koyee whispered, turned away from the door, and began to pace. She closed her eyes, remembering home: the song of the river, gently flowing, scattering beads of moonlight; the lanterns that swung from the boats, orange spirits that floated in the dark; her humble hut, a warm and cozy place of memory; and mostly her family . . . her brother, who'd left so long ago, and her father who lay buried beneath the Nighttower.

Was it all gone now?

She stared between the window bars at the towers of Pahmey, wonders of crystal and glass. This was a city of beauty, but it was not her home. She lowered her head.

A scraping sounded behind her.

She spun around to see a shadow dart under the doorway.

A key slid under the frame.

Koyee leaped forward and grabbed the key.

"Did you bring it back, Eelani?" she said. She stared out the keyhole, wondering if another yezyana had brought her this gift, but could see nobody. When she looked at her shoulder, she thought she felt warmth settling down. Eelani was back.

Tongue thrust between her teeth, Koyee placed the key into the keyhole, turned, and heard the lock click. Biting her lip, she twisted the doorknob as slowly as she could. The door creaked open, and Koyee thrust her head out into the hallway. She saw nothing but shadows and a single lantern.

She tiptoed down the hallway, holding her breath, her sword sheathed across her back. Her heart nearly stopped as she climbed downstairs, but she forced herself onward. When she emerged into the common room, she pressed herself against the shadowy wall. Smoke filled the place; it would hide her.

"Now hush, Eelani," she whispered. She dropped to her hands and knees and crawled between the beds. The smokers lay slumped upon the mattresses, arms dangling to the floor, their fingernails long and curling. Smoke swirled everywhere and Koyee struggled not to cough. As she crawled, she glanced up toward the bar; Nukari stood there, counting coins and grumbling of cheap patrons. Koyee crawled around another bed, glanced up again, and saw Lilika dancing upon a stage. The tall, golden-eyed yezyana looked down and met Koyee's gaze. Koyee's heart thrashed and she froze, sure that Lilika would alert their master, but the dancer only smiled and winked.

Holding her breath, Koyee scuttled forward the last few feet, reached the front door, and burst outside onto the street.

She ran a few feet down the road, then had to pause. Her head spun, and she inhaled a deep breath of fresh, cold air. For so long—almost two moons—she had languished inside the Green Geode, inhaling smoke and perfume. For a few heartbeats, she could only stand on the street, breathing deeply.

Then, with a determined nod, she ran again.

She raced past glittering shops of glass, columned theaters of gold and silver, and temples of light and song. People cursed and yelped and moved aside. Her heart pounded and she grimaced as she ran, arms pumping.

Her lungs were blazing and her legs wobbling when she reached Minlao Palace. The same old guards stood there, tall and clad in white robes, their faces painted with coiling silver strands.

"Hello, daughter of Eloria," they said, pleasant as always. "Welcome to—"

"I have to get through!" she shouted. She ran toward the palace doorway only to slam against the guards who moved to block her passage.

"Certainly, friend," said one. He unrolled a scroll and unpinned a ribbon. "Take this yellow ribbon and—"

"I don't have time for that!" Koyee shouted. She tried to shove past them again, and when they blocked her way, she pulled her hair with frustration. "The Timandrians attacked my village, and—"

When the guards only smiled pleasantly, Koyee let out a loud, long groan. She spun around and raced away.

There had to be somebody who'd listen, who could help!

She raced down more streets, sweat dampening her new dress of black silk, until she saw the Night Castle ahead—the great pagoda where the city's soldiers lived. Golden statues topped its five tiers of sloping, green roofs. Arrowslits covered its brick walls. Guards stood outside its gates, covered in armor of steel scales, their shields emblazoned with the moonstar. Helmets topped their heads, the visors shaped as spirits and demons. Katanas, their hilts wrapped in blue, green, and black silk, hung at their sides.

"Timandra attacks!" Koyee cried, running toward them. She hoped that her own katana—and perhaps her fine new dress—would impress them enough to listen. "News comes from Oshy. The village burns."

She stood panting before them, but the guards only stared at her silently, faces hidden.

"We need to send men west!" Koyee cried. "Maybe we can still save the village. Let me speak to your lord!"

Still they said nothing, and when she tried to push between them, they blocked her passage. With another scream, eyes burning, Koyee left the castle and raced down the streets.

"What do we do, Eelani?" she asked. "By the stars, what do we do?"

Her spirit hopped upon her shoulder and Koyee knew the answer. She would do what her father would. She would not rely on others. She would not beg for help from strangers. When Timandra had attacked Oshy the first time, he had gone out himself to face them, a single man with a single sword.

"I will defend Eloria," Koyee swore to herself. "If nobody else will fight with me, I will fight alone. I will wield the same blade he did. If I die, I die proud."

She wiped her brow, took a deep breath, and kept moving.

All around her, the city bustled as usual. Shoppers wandered through markets. At street corners, buskers played lutes, juggled glass balls, or breathed fire. The poor scuttled around barefoot while the wealthy rode upon palanquins, carriages, or bluefeathers with clacking beaks. The scents and sights and sounds of Pahmey swirled around Koyee as usual. Nobody here knew of the danger. Nobody knew of her thrashing heart.

When she reached the city gates, she found them wide open; people were leaving and entering, paying their tolls. Outside, the ships of traders and fishermen sailed. Only five guards stood at the gates. Koyee ran toward a staircase that climbed the city wall. She raced up, hair damp with sweat, until she reached the battlements and gazed out upon the night plains.

"Girl!" shouted a soldier, clanking toward her. A helmet hid his face, and a cloak draped across his shoulders. "Get back down into the city. Only soldiers may stand up here."

Koyee ignored him, looked west toward the distant dark lands, and a chill ran through her. She gripped her sword, and the wind blew her hair.

"Now I'm a soldier too," she whispered. "Now we must all fight."

The man took another step toward her, fists clenching. Across the battlements a hundred other soldiers stood in armor, holding spears and bows.

"Girl, I am warning you," he said. "You must—"

"The fire rises," she whispered, staring into the west, and took a shuddering breath. "The river burns."

The guard grabbed her arm. "Girl, I told you, you . . ."

He froze, turned to follow her gaze, and his grip loosened. Koyee stared with him. Along the horizon, an orange glow rose like the dusk. Upon the distant waters of the Inaro River, a line of fire coiled like a red worm into a vein. Her pulse pounded in her ears, but Koyee could hear distant cries, trumpets, and drums.

"The sun rises," the soldier whispered and released her arm.

Koyee drew her sword and stared off the battlements. She shook her head. "The sun stays in Timandra. Its demons flow forth." She raised her chin, squared her shoulders, and forced a deep breath. "War is here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
GIFTS OF THE NIGHT

Ceranor leaned over his ship's prow, stared down the river, and beheld a distant cluster of glass and light. He sucked in air and gripped the railing.

"A city," he said. "A city in the night."

For years, his face had done nothing but frown. Now a smile twitched the corners of his lips and creaked his skin.

From here, miles away, he could see no details. The glow ahead looked like a jewel discarded upon a black blanket, shards of green and pink and silver rising like crystals. Ceranor could have hidden them with his thumb. All around this glowing nexus, the darkness spread into the horizons, endless miles of lifeless plains and hills under a starry sky.

"A beacon of light in the darkness," he said softly into the night wind. "Here is our prize."

His ship, the *River Raven*, sailed smoothly along the river, the current taking them toward the distant lights. The water was a mile wide; sailing along the northern bank, Ceranor could only glimpse the southern lands when moonlight glinted against boulders. He sailed ahead of his fleet, and when he looked behind him, he saw a hundred ships following, the Ardish navy in all its might.

"My king," said Torin, coming to stand beside him. "We cannot repeat what happened at the village. We cannot slaughter these people mindlessly, soldiers and civilians alike."

Ceranor turned to look at the boy. It had been ten hourglass turns since they'd burned the village, and Torin still seemed

shaken. Rather than stare at the distant city in delight, the boy's eyes filled with shadows. His face seemed milky pale in the moonlight, and even the lamps that hung from the *River Raven*'s masts, casting warm light, could not hide his pallor.

"You have my word." Ceranor nodded. "What happened at the village was unfortunate. We were too eager to fight; we destroyed when we should have conquered. But this city . . ." He looked back at the distant lights and inhaled deeply. "This city is a great prize—not to crush, but to cherish, to keep safe. This will be a place of jewels and gold and wealth. Do you see the little lights on the river? Those are ships, Torin. Elorian ships bearing the treasures of the night. They will be ours."

Torin said nothing, only stared ahead, face blank.

He has no lust for conquest, Ceranor thought. *He is still a gardener at heart; he feels lost in a barren land where no tree, flower, or grass can grow.*

Ceranor thought back to his own youth. When he'd been eighteen, the same age as Torin now, he'd fought his first battle, an ugly affair in the southern jungles of Naya. Their horses and carriages had gotten bogged down in the swamps. Mud had filled their armor and insects had laid eggs in their skin. The southern warriors, clad in tiger furs, had ripped through the Ardish infantry. Ceranor had marched south a callow youth; he returned to Arden scarred and hardened, mourning the loss of his friends, his heart tempered like his blade.

Torin's spirit will be forged here, Ceranor thought. *He is soft now, and he is afraid, but this land will make him a man.*

"I wish your father were here with us, Torin," he said to the boy. "The men loved him. I miss him. I know you do too." He placed a hand on Torin's shoulder. "I cannot bring him back, but I promise you—in this battle, I will watch over you as a father."

Finally Torin looked at him, eyes haunted. "What would my father say if he were here? Would he celebrate this conquest, or would he ask you to sail back home?"

Ceranor leaned across the railing. "Torin, if we sail back now, we will not have a home to return to. Mageria nearly crushed us in the last war; their wizards have since been mustering more magic. In the north, the snowy barbarians shouted for war. In the south, the jungle warriors craved our blood. This war sent them all into the night." Ceranor swept his arm across the barren landscape. "They now march across lifeless plains; they find only rock and dust to conquer. But this city ahead . . ." He pointed at the growing cluster of light. "If the Ardish fleet can capture this city, we will have its jewels, its steel, its gold. Those of its warriors who lay down their arms will be allowed to serve us. Arden will emerge victorious, the greatest kingdom of Dayside. No more will our enemies threaten us. No more will our commoners, hungry and afraid, demand the blood of their king. Arden will be safe."

"And Eloria will crumble," Torin said softly. "Thus will we buy our safety—with the defeat of another race."

Ceranor nodded. "That is how the world has always worked, Torin. The mighty raven leads his flock by pecking the weaker birds. There is only security in strength. There is only might in conquest. Gardeners foster flowers, greenery, and butterflies. Kings must deal with blood."

Torin opened his mouth as if to speak and then shut it. His eyes narrowed and he stared over the king's shoulder. He pointed upward.

"My king! A light in the sky."

Ceranor turned, looked into the night sky, and frowned. A light indeed shone there, but it was not as distant as the moon or stars. Whatever it was, it came gliding from the east, heading toward their fleet. Ceranor's eyes had spent five decades gazing upon a sunlit world; it took a moment to focus on what floated above.

"It looks like a boat," he said, unable to hide the awe from his voice. "A boat in the sky."

Only it wasn't a boat, not truly. Instead of a hull, it had merely a large basket. Instead of sails, it was topped with a round patchwork of cloth; it looked like a great, upside down sack. A single Elorian stood in the basket, and a fire burned beside him, filling the round patchwork with light. The vessel glided to fly directly above them, a good thousand yards above.

Ceranor understood.

"A spy," he said, grabbed his bow, and nocked an arrow. "A spy in a flying demon ship. Men, shoot it down!"

He fired his arrow. His archers shot around him. Ceranor stared upward, scowling. The demon ship, however, flew too high. The arrows arched and came falling down; they vanished into the river.

As the men shot more arrows, the flying vessel turned and began drifting back toward the city.

"Whatever sorcery they use," Ceranor said, "it gave them a good look at us." He clutched his bow. "Dark magic cannot save them, not from our might. Their eyes in the sky will only foster their fear." He stared toward the city, jaw tight. "Look, Torin. Towers appear."

As the fleet sailed closer, details emerged. It seemed to Ceranor that a wall surrounded the city, a black ring. A hill rose within, its towers rising, tall and thin and lit. Upon the hilltop, a central tower rose silver and bright; a dome topped it like a moon. Smaller towers clustered all around, green and white and blue. The structures seemed made of crystal and glass; they glowed with inner light. The river ran south of the city, dotted with lanterns; a hundred or more ships sailed there. The village had given Ceranor little treasure; only a few sacks of crayfish, some coins, and a handful of jewels.

But this place . . . this place will make me an emperor.

Ceranor turned to face his men. Two hundred soldiers crowded the deck of the *River Raven*, clad in steel and bearing

swords, shields, and bows. Hundreds more waited in its hull. Twenty thousand more troops sailed behind his flagship; the fleet stretched a mile along the river, its hundreds of masts rising like a forest, their lanterns bright.

"Men of sunlight!" Ceranor called out. "We bring light to the darkness. We sail toward a great city of gold, crystal, and jewels. We will liberate this city from the night. We will bring it light and justice, and its treasures will be ours." He drew his sword and raised the blade. "You will fight well! You will fight bravely. I, King Ceranor, fight with you. Torin Greenmoat, son of the great hero Teramin, fights with you. For the sun! For light! We will be victorious!"

They raised their swords and shouted together. "For light!"

All across the fleet they chanted and brandished their weapons, twenty thousand warriors, noble and strong. Their cries rolled across the landscapes of night.

"This city will be ours!" Ceranor cried, and they cheered.

He turned back toward the distant lights. With every breath, the city grew closer, and more details emerged; he could see smaller houses now, pagodas, and snaking streets. He could see the sails of their ships. The city was massive; it seemed thrice the size of Kingswall, the largest city in Arden.

"Hundreds of thousands must live here," he said. "They will be ours to govern."

Torin looked back at the fleet. "My king, only part of our army sails on these ships. Should we not anchor down and wait for our infantry and cavalry?"

Ceranor shook his head. "We have all we need to take this city. Our infantry marches across the plains; they won't be here for two hourglass turns. When they arrive, we will welcome them through this city's gates." He clutched Torin's arm. "We are the fabled Ardish armada. We are the vanguard. We are the spearhead, the conquerors of darkness. Fight by my side, and we

will be heroes of daylight. All other kings will bow before us. Ready your sword, Torin Greenmoat. War is here."

Feet scuffled across the deck, and Bailey Berin came racing up toward them. Her eyes flashed and her braids flounced. She had joined their army wearing the crude armor of the outposts. Ceranor had outfitted her with true steel; she now wore a fine breastplate, and a cloak of black and gold draped across her shoulders. She clutched a shield, its surface sporting a raven upon a golden field, and drew her sword.

"I am with you, Torin," she said and raised her chin. She turned toward the king. "Without me, he'd fall into the water." She looked over her shoulder and shouted out. "Hem, Cam! I told you to stay with me. To me, boys!" She patted her thigh. "To me!"

The two young villagers stumbled forth, panting. Ceranor had outfitted them in new armor and cloaks, yet even shiny steel couldn't hide their countryside awkwardness. Ceranor smiled thinly—his second smile in long years.

They remind me of my own youth, he thought. *Wasn't I clumsy when I was their age . . . but still eager for the fight?*

"You are blessed to have such close friends, Torin," he said. "Now look! A boat sails our way. First blood will soon spill."

Ceranor's heart pumped and he inhaled deeply, savoring the cold air. This was what he lived for—not stuffy courts, not twisting politics, not silly young wives—but this . . . the open air, the anticipation of blood, and the thrill of looming battle.

The boat sailing their way was small, hardly more than a humble pontoon. Poles rose from its corners, supporting a silk canopy. A battened sail billowed upon its mast, sporting a circle within a star. Lanterns floated above the hull, tethered to the railing with strings, casting green and red lights that glimmered on the river; the lanterns seemed to use the same magic as the flying ship.

Ceranor nodded at the archers who stood to his left. They nodded back and drew arrows.

When Ceranor returned his eyes ahead, the pontoon was closer, and he could discern figures standing at its prow. This was no military ship. Three Elorians stood there, elders clad in blue silken robes, their beards flowing down to their slippers. They held out strings of gems, chains of gold and silver, and amulets.

"We might not even have to fight for this treasure," Ceranor said, raising his eyebrows. "The night folk bring us their jewels willingly, it would seem."

The ships sailed closer together—a fleet of mighty warships sailing east and a single pontoon, barely larger than a carriage, sailing to meet them. Upon their boat, the Elorian elders smiled. Silver stars and moons gleamed upon their robes, and beads shone around their necks. The sight of Elorians still unnerved Ceranor; their eyes were as large and green as limes—freakish things. Ceranor's own eyes could only see where lanterns glowed; he had a feeling these Elorians could see across the plains as clearly as in daylight.

It makes them dangerous foes, he thought, then let his eyes linger upon the jewels they bore. *Wealthy foes.*

One of the elders called out to them, voice pleasant. He spoke in a language Ceranor could not understand; its syllables flowed from sound to sound, full of vowels and almost no consonants he could recognize, a language like wind on water. The elders held out their jewels and smiled.

"They're welcoming us," Torin said, his voice barely a whisper. "We burned their village, yet they welcome us peacefully. They offer us gifts."

"They seek not to welcome us," Ceranor said, "but to appease us. They see our mighty fleet, and they know they cannot defeat us. They seek to send us away with a few trinkets." He looked up at the crystal city that rose several miles away. "But we

will have more than the few jewels three elders can bear. Arden will have the wealth of this mighty city."

The Elorian boat reached them, swaying in the water, its silken canopy strewn with golden stars, moons, and fish. The elders smiled up at them.

"Let them on board!" Ceranor cried out. "They bear gifts. Lower the plank!"

Sailors bustled about, and soon a wooden plank ran down from the *River Raven* to the smaller ship. The elders stood upon their deck, smiling up, but did not climb onto the larger vessel.

"They're afraid," Torin said. "They smile but fear fills their eyes."

"They *should* be afraid," said Ceranor. "They face the might of the sun. Come with me, Torin. We'll climb aboard their vessel and accept their treasure. It would be a pity to sink a boat laden with jewels."

Hand clutching his sword's hilt, Ceranor crossed the deck of his flagship, stepped onto the plank, and walked down toward the Elorian pontoon. Behind him, he heard Torin's footsteps as the boy followed.

When he reached the pontoon, the elders smiled and bowed their heads, jewels and chains still in their hands. Ceranor stepped on board. The deck seemed made of clay molded around a metal frame; it thumped hollowly with every step. Lanterns glowed along the railings, shaped as faces with bright eyes and mocking mouths. Torin came to stand beside him, face somber.

"*Sen sen*," said one of the Elorians, hand raised in welcome. He was an ancient creature, his pale face wrinkled like a raisin, his beard white and flowing. He held the gifts out toward Ceranor. "*Tinshay* Eloria."

Ceranor took the jewels, strings of gems, and golden chains. He bowed his head.

"*Sen sen*," he said, guessing—hoping—that meant 'hello.' "I am King Ceranor of Arden, a kingdom of Timandra. My companion is Torin Greenmoat."

The elders brought forth more gifts. One held out a chest full of golden coins. They spoke more in their lilting language, bowing their heads and smiling. They seemed like servile pups groveling before a larger dog, Ceranor thought. It pleased him.

"Imagine the treasures in this city, Torin!" he said, pointing at the cluster of lights, which still lay on the horizon. "This land is wealthier than we imagined."

Finally the elders' smiles faded. Their eyes darkened. They shook their heads and pointed west, away from the city. Their voices grew more vigorous.

"*Loy* Pahmey," one said firmly, blocking the view of the city with his body. "*Loy. Loy!* Timandra *loy* Pahmey."

"My king," Torin said, stepping closer to Ceranor. "They are telling us that their city is forbidden. *Loy* probably means no. The city is probably named Pahmey." The boy turned back toward the Elorians, pointed at the city, and asked, "Pahmey?"

The elders nodded, then pointed westward, back toward distant Timandra. They spoke some more; Ceranor could understand none of it, but he knew what they were saying.

"They want us to sail back," he said. "Do you see, son? They hoped to appease us with gifts, then send us on our way." Ceranor sighed. "It is sad. We have a hundred ships; they cannot hope to oppose us. We'll take these elders back to the *River Raven* and chain them in the brig; they will become our servants. We will keep their ship; it's a useful vessel."

Torin swallowed, looked at the Elorians, and pointed at Pahmey again.

"You must let us sail in peacefully," he said to the elders. "Do you understand?" Torin gestured with his hands, mimicking a

ship sailing through a gate. "Let us into Pahmey and we won't harm you. You must let us in peacefully or we will fight."

The Elorians only shook their heads more vigorously, looking distraught. They spoke louder; Ceranor only understood "no" and "Pahmey" over and over.

He placed his hand on Torin's shoulder.

"Come now, it's no use, son. They don't understand. They are simpletons; I doubt Elorians have more sense than children. We'll take them back to our ship." Ceranor reached out toward the Elorians and gestured for them to follow. "Come, my friends! Return with me to my flagship."

The Elorians recoiled and reached into their robes. They produced more jewels and held them forth.

Whistles sounded.

Shards tore through the night.

An arrow slammed into one Elorian's chest.

Ceranor inhaled sharply and drew his sword. Before he could react, two more arrows whistled. Two more Elorians fell, clutching their chests.

Blood splashed the deck. One of the elders managed to crawl to the railing, and two more arrows slammed into his back. With his dying breath, the bearded Elorian untied a red lantern. The light floated away from the ship, rising like a phoenix, the color of blood.

Growling, Ceranor spun around toward the *River Raven*. Sailith monks stood above, clad in yellow robes, bows in hand. Ferius stood among them, teeth bared, and lowered his bow.

"Are you safe, my king?" the monk called down from the larger ship, though no concern filled his voice, only restrained glee.

Damn the man!

"I needed them alive!" Ceranor shouted up at him.

Ferius only smirked. "They were reaching into their robes for weapons, my king. I had to keep you safe."

"They were reaching for gifts, you fool."

Teeth bared, Ceranor turned back toward the Elorians. All three lay dead. Torin knelt above them, fists clenched.

"Now do you see, my king?" the boy said, voice strained. "Now do you see the evil we bring with us? These monks will spark a flame to burn us all. We could have entered the city peacefully. We could have *negotiated*."

Ceranor forced himself to swallow down his anger. Evil or not, the Sailith Order was almost as strong as the crown; they were a beast that needed constant feeding. Here, bleeding upon the Elorian deck, were three more logs for their fire.

"Come with me, Torin. Back to our ship. We sail on." Ceranor looked toward the cluster of towers, bridges, and glass domes. "We sail to Pahmey."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
FIRE ON THE WATER

Once back aboard the *River Raven*, Torin couldn't help himself. He lunged toward Ferius, grabbed the man's robes, and shook him wildly.

"Next time shoot yourself and rid the world of your idiocy!" he said.

Torin had never been quick to anger, yet now his rage pulsed through him, shaking his arms. Ferius only smiled thinly, eyes full of amusement.

"Are all gardeners so violent?" he asked, clutched in Torin's grip. "My my, aren't you a feisty one. Save your fury for the enemy, boy, not for a humble monk."

Torin gripped tighter, thrust his face close, and glared at Ferius. The two's faces were but inches apart.

"Oh, but you are my enemy, Ferius," he said. "And I am no gardener here, but a soldier clad in armor, bearing a sword. You wear simple robes of wool. Anger me again, and you will not find me so meek."

Ferius raised his eyebrows, but his smile remained mocking. "But I only seek to serve my king. I believed him threatened. I believed that the demons, those creatures you love, meant to harm him. I slew them. I rid the world of their darkness. You sought to bring their darkness aboard our ship."

Torin twisted the man's collar. He snarled, surprised at how much hatred filled him. "I tire of your lies, Ferius. Have you ever spoken a word of truth? You might fool the king but not me."

With a smirk, Ferius leaned close, and his voice dropped to a whisper. His breath fluttered against Torin's ear.

"Truth, gardener? You want to hear the truth?" Ferius said. "Here is the truth for your ears only. I will slay every man, woman, and child in this city of darkness. I will slay every last Elorian in the dark side of the world. And you will watch, Torin Greenmoat. You will watch them burn."

Iciness flooded Torin, and for a moment he could only stand frozen, clutching the monk's robes. The slaughter in the village still haunted him. To slay an entire people . . . Torin felt sick. He gave the man's robes another twist. He was about to shake him again, to shout, even to toss him overboard. A hand on his shoulder jolted him. He turned to see the king.

"Torin, leave him!" said Ceranor. "Let him be. Look off the prow. The city is near and another ship approaches."

With a grumble, Torin tossed the monk free. Hunched over, Ferius sneered and snapped his teeth at Torin, but all the while, his smile stretched across his face. Torin forced himself to turn toward the eastern waters, resisting the urge to attack the monk again.

Since entering the darkness, Torin had begun to notice that he could see farther and clearer than others. It had taken him several hourglass turns to realize that his wounded eye, the one with the permanently dilated pupil, worked perfectly in the darkness. Back in Timandra, that eye saw only smudges, nearly blinded by the influx of light. Here in Eloria, it was his good eye that felt blind. As Torin stared ahead, he knew that he could see the distant city better than anyone on his ship.

Pahmey loomed ahead, only four or five miles away now. While before it had seemed like a cluster of distant crystals, now Torin could make out individual buildings. A hundred towers soared here. Smaller buildings rose between them, their walls glimmering as if made of glass, their roofs green and silver.

Domes reflected the moonlight. Bridges ran from tower to tower, and streets snaked across a hill like cobwebs. Black walls surrounded Pahmey, silver where the moonlight touched them. Outside the walls, a hundred ships were moored along docks.

One ship, larger than the elders' pontoon, was sailing their way. A single sailor stood upon it, steering it forward. Its two sails were wide and battened, and painted blue dragons coiled along its hull. The deck was laden with narrow tubes of many colors. Each tube rose as tall as a man, painted green, red, and blue and topped with a colorful cone. They were stacked together in a pyre.

"I don't like this, Torin," said Bailey. She came to stand beside him and held his hand. "What are those things?"

Torin narrowed his eyes and stared. "They're too colorful to be weapons. Some are painted with stars and moons."

The Ardish fleet sailed on, a hundred ships of war. The single Elorian cog sailed toward them, laden with its colorful pyre of tubes. The Elorian sailor steered his boat toward the *River Raven*. This one was no elder, but a young man with clear cheeks and somber eyes.

King Ceranor turned toward his soldiers.

"Archers!" he said. "Send a volley his way. If he's a madman, he'll die for it."

A dozen men nodded, lit arrows tipped with kindling, and tugged their bowstrings. With a dozen twangs, flaming arrows flew toward the Elorian vessel.

Several arrows landed in the water, extinguishing with hisses. Several more thudded against the ship's hull, but this ship too was built of metal and clay; it did not burn. One arrow struck true, thrusting into the Elorian. The man grunted but kept steering his ship onward.

"Archers, fire!" Ceranor shouted.

A dozen more flaming arrows flew, their light reflecting against the water. The Elorian sailor ducked for cover. Several arrows slammed into the hull, while two clattered against the deck.

The ship kept sailing forward; it was only a couple hundred yards away.

A fizzling sound rose.

Fire crackled aboard the Elorian boat.

With a whiz, one of the colorful tubes blasted upward like an arrow from a ballista. It soared into the night sky, twirled madly, and then exploded, showering a tree of green sparks.

Aboard the *River Raven*, men gasped and pointed. Soldiers stared at the cascade of lights above, a fountain of emerald beads. But Torin only glanced upward and then returned his eyes to the Elorian boat.

"Merciful Idar," he whispered. "There are hundreds of them . . . thousands."

The Elorian ship's sails billowed. It came racing toward them, only a hundred yards away and closing the gap. Atop the Ardish ships, more archers tugged back bowstrings.

"Stop, wait!" Torin shouted, but he was too late.

A hundred flaming arrows flew toward the Elorian vessel.

Fire crackled against its deck. Whizzes and hisses rose and sparks showered.

"Bailey, get down!" Torin grabbed his friend and pulled her flat onto the deck. "Hem, Cam—down!"

Flat on the deck and holding Bailey, Torin raised his head to see the Elorian junk barrel into the Timandrian fleet. A tube flew upward and exploded, blasting red sparks. From a dozen Timandrian decks, arrows flew.

For an instant, Torin dared to hope that was it.

Then, with a crash that nearly deafened him, a thousand of the colorful Elorian tubes blasted out.

Fire lit the sky.

Thousands of streams of smoke spurted every which way. Flames burst. Shards of color—green, blue, red, and yellow—showered like shattered stained glass. One tube buzzed over Torin's head, leaving a wake of smoke. Another crashed into the ship's hull only feet away.

The *River Raven* rocked.

Wood cracked.

Beams snapped, rising from the deck like wooden claws.

Two more projectiles whizzed overhead. One slammed into a mast, and another crashed against the prow, snapping off the raven figurehead. The sails burned. Smoke billowed. Fire raged and Torin saw men run, wreathed in flames. The ship tilted and more of the projectiles spun overhead. Lights filled the sky, raining down with fire and smoke.

"Idar's beard, what are those things?" Bailey shouted, but Torin barely heard her; his ears rang.

He rose to his feet, grabbed her shoulders, and yanked her up.

"Abandon ship!" he shouted, looking through the smoke, seeking the king, seeking his friends. He saw nothing but the inferno. Wood cracked, splinters showered, and a mast slammed down. It hit the deck only feet away, its sail burning. He leaped back, pulling Bailey with him. They reached the ship's port side. The bulwark towered above them; the ship was tilting the other way, and already its starboard side was sinking into the water.

"Cam!" Torin shouted. "Hem!"

He could not see them. He coughed and clutched the railing, holding on as the ship sank. Bailey clung at his side. Scuffling his feet against the bulwark, Torin saw the rest of the Ardish fleet, and his heart sank.

A dozen ships blazed. Three were sinking; the others were listing. Men raced across the decks, shouting and slapping at burning tunics and cloaks, their hair ablaze. Some jumped into the

water, only to flail and sink in their armor. A burning sail tore free from a mast, flew against a group of soldiers, and wrapped around them. The men screamed as they died.

"Armor off!" the king was shouting somewhere in the distance; Torin couldn't see him. "Armor off and swim!"

Coughing, Torin began unbuckling his armor. The pieces came free frustratingly slowly. When he glanced eastward across the blasted prow, he cursed. Through the smoke and sparks, he saw three more Elorian junks sailing their way. Each bore more of the colorful tubes, these weapons of sparks and flame. As Torin tossed off his breastplate, he saw one of the Elorian ships blast out its projectiles. A blue shard flew, leaving a wake of smoke, to slam into the already-burning *River Raven*.

The ship blazed. Fire blasted upward. The deck splintered and the ship cracked in half.

"Torin, hurry up!" Bailey cried, one arm slung across the railing as the ship sank. She tore at his vambrace and tossed the steel aside.

Finally free of armor, they climbed over the port side bulwark, which now thrust upward; the starboard side was gone underwater, and the front of the ship had detached.

They straddled the railing, coughing, their cloaks smoldering. Torin clutched Bailey's hand and their eyes met through the smoke. She tightened her lips. He nodded.

They placed their feet against the hull, kicked off, and leaped from the sinking carrack. Fire blasted around them. Another missile whistled forward, spinning madly, and crashed into the ship. The bulwark—which they'd clung to just a heartbeat ago—shattered. Torin held his breath and they crashed into the water.

The shock nearly stopped his heart. The water was icy cold, and at once he began to shiver and flounder. He thought this chill could kill him as readily as the fire, and he cursed. His teeth

chattered. Beside him, Bailey's face whitened and her lips turned blue.

They swam. Men bustled around them in the water like flies in blood. Sparks rained around them, hissing and steaming as they hit the river. Smoke and flame filled the air. When Torin looked around, he saw the three junk ships crash into the Timandrian fleet, firing their weapons. Elorians stood upon the decks, clad in scale armor, armed with bows and swords. Timandrian ships burned and sank all around.

"They're going to smash through us!" Bailey shouted, swimming beside him. "By Idar, that idiot king is going to get us all killed."

Arrows whistled around them and thunked into the water. Painted black, they were fletched with silk—Elorian arrows. One pierced the water behind Torin, and he grunted when it scraped along his thigh.

"Just swim back west!" he shouted. "Back to our other ships."

He pointed as he swam. The vanguard of the Timandrian fleet burned and sank, but farther west along the river, ninety ships still sailed toward the fray.

"Where are Cam and Hem?" she said, spitting water.

"I don't know! I saw them running across the deck. I think they're swimming too."

He scanned the river, seeking them. Thousands of Timandrians floundered in the water. Some floated, pierced with arrows. Finally he saw his two friends; they were swimming ahead, sputtering, their hair burnt and wet.

Torin and Bailey swam toward them.

Coughing water, his forehead bleeding, Cam managed a grin. "Having fun yet, darlings?"

Though she coughed and shivered, Bailey managed to slap the young shepherd. "Be quiet and swim! There, the *Sunspear*." She

pointed at a carrack ahead, one of Arden's warships. "Toward that ship."

The friends swam through the river. As ships burned and sparks blazed overhead, Torin realized that Eloria had become as bright as the day.

After what seemed ages of swimming, they reached the *Sunspear*, and its sailors tossed down rope ladders. They climbed, burnt and half-drowned and shivering. Around them, soldiers bustled and shouted. Archers stood lining the bulwark, firing arrows. When Torin stared east, he lost his breath.

Several Timandrian ships were gone. Several more were nothing but burning wood. Flaming arrows were flying off the surviving ships, slamming into the Elorian fleet, but the junks were built of clay, metal, and leather; the flaming arrows thumped into the hulls and extinguished, doing the vessels no harm. Missiles still flew from the Elorian decks, whizzing, and slammed into Timandrian ships with blasts of green, blue, and yellow light. More ships sank. More men screamed, burned, and died.

"There are only three Elorian warships," Bailey said, shivering beside him. "And they're tearing through us like steel through wool. Our arrows can't stop them."

A low, oared galley raced along the starboard bow, bearing the standards of Arden. Torin looked down to see King Ceranor upon the deck. Behind him stood a hundred Timandrian soldiers in armor, swords drawn.

"To the Elorian ships!" the king shouted, voice hoarse. "Board them! We fight on their decks. For light!"

The galley rowed onward, driving toward an Elorian junk. Beneath Torin's feet, the *Sunspear* turned to sail the same way.

"For light!" cried a sailor upon the mast. "Draw your swords!"

Torin drew his blade. At his side, his friends did the same. Bailey bared her teeth. Cam hissed. Lips blue, Hem shuddered but held his sword tight. Their carrack raced toward the Elorian junk.

As they neared, Torin stared into the Elorians' eyes. Those eyes blazed with fury. Hundreds of Elorians stood upon the junk's deck, each covered in steel and bearing a sword.

With a thud that nearly knocked Torin down, the two ships slammed together.

The armies spilled from ship to ship, crashed together, and swung their blades.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
THE HUNGRY RIVER

The carrack swayed madly below him. Light burned above. Fire, bodies, and debris spread across the water. Torin stumbled from side to side, sword clutched in his hand, as the Elorian warriors leaped onto his ship.

"Torin!" Bailey screamed somewhere in the distance, but he couldn't see her.

The enemy charged toward him. They wore armor of clattering scales; it reminded Torin of fish skin. Their helmets swooped downward, the visors shaped as animals—fish, wolves, and hawks. The eye-holes were large, revealing oversized, gleaming orbs of blue, green, and violet. In their left hands, they carried round shields emblazoned with a moonstar. In their right hands they swung curved swords—*katanas*, Torin heard his fellow soldiers call them.

Torin had begun to see the Elorians as a gentle, peaceful race. Now he saw pale demons.

He had lost his armor into the water, but he still had his shield. With a shout, he raised the triangle of iron-banded wood. Howling battle cries, an Elorian swung his katana. The blade slammed into Torin's shield, thudding into its raven sigil. Several more Elorians lunged toward him.

Fear washed over Torin, colder than the river, all-consuming. For a moment he could barely breathe, barely move. All he could do was stare at the enemy, eyes wide, a deer caught facing a pack of wolves.

I'm going to die, he thought. *I'm going to die here in darkness, far from home.*

His foe raised his katana again, and Torin steeled himself.

No. My father would refuse to die like this in the dark. My father would fight.

With a yowl, Torin swung his shield. Blade crashed into wood again, and splinters showered.

Torin thrust his sword.

He did not crave to kill. He had never killed an enemy. But here in the fire and smoke, instinct took over. The king had been teaching him swordplay, but all of those lessons vanished from his mind. He swung his sword in blind passion.

His blade arced and slammed against the Elorian's armor.

Silvery scales cracked and flew.

The Elorian swung his sword downward. Torin raised his shield again, blocked the blow, and thrust his own sword. The katana parried Torin's doubled-edged blade, then swung again.

The ship swayed beneath them. Fire filled the sky. All around, ships blazed and crashed together, and armies clashed. Across the deck of the *Sunspear*, dozens of other troops fought and died. Torin fought in a haze, shouting wordlessly, thrusting his sword again and again.

An Elorian junk drove through the water, rammed against the *Sunspear* several feet away, and the ship jolted. The deck sloped. Torin's foe slipped in blood and fell, yet still he lashed his katana, aiming at Torin's legs.

Torin's body moved faster than his thoughts. He leaped sideways. He swung his blade down, screaming. His sword slammed into the Elorian's chest, drove between the steel scales, and crashed into flesh.

Blood leaked between the scales.

Torin stood frozen, leaning against the blade.

The Elorian met his gaze. Fear filled the large, azure eyes

. . . and then they went blank.

I killed a man, Torin thought. *Oh Idar, I killed a man.*

Even as others battled and screamed around him, he knelt over the Elorian. He placed his hand against the man's helmet.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, I didn't . . . I didn't mean to."

Grimacing, he tugged his sword. It came free with a gush of blood. Torin's eyes burned. He pounded the man's chest, but the Elorian would not wake.

I tried to stop this violence! Torin thought, eyes burning. *I didn't want to kill anyone. I tried to—*

Wails sounded behind him.

Torin spun his head. He saw two Elorians racing his way, katanas raised.

He was still kneeling over the dead man. His shield and sword were lowered. In that instant, Torin knew he had no time to block the assault. He knew he would die.

"Torin!"

Color and light blazed.

Bailey came swinging from a mast, clutching a rope. Her boots slammed into the two charging Elorians, one into each man's chest. The warriors fell backward, flipped over the smashed railing, and splashed into the river.

Bailey released the rope, landed on her feet, and turned toward Torin. Her eyes flashed with anger, and she yanked him to his feet, then slapped him.

"You foolish boy!" she said. "I knew I'd have to save you, Winky. Now raise your sword and fight, damn it!"

More Elorians raced toward them. Standing back-to-back, Torin and Bailey fought. The night burned around them.

The ship kept rocking. Corpses slid across the deck and spilled into the water. More Timandrians kept rising from the hull, replacing those who fell. Coughing in the smoke, Torin saw his

comrades leaping onto the Elorian junks that had rammed them. The battle had moved to those dark, clay decks.

"I'm going up for a view!" he shouted to Bailey.

He raced toward the mast, grabbed a rope ladder, and climbed. Cold air whipped him, thick with smoke. Clinging to the ladder with one hand, Torin surveyed the battle.

In the east, he counted a dozen burning Timandrian ships. Some were sinking; others were still floating toward the city as their sails blazed. Several Timandrian ships had been lost; only the tips of their masts rose from the river. Shards of wood floated across the water along with corpses. When Torin looked back westward, he saw dozens of ships still sailing toward the battle; they hadn't even fought yet, and thousands of soldiers stood ready on their decks.

"I see only three Elorian warships!" Torin shouted down.

Was that all the Elorians had? Across all three junks, Timandrian soldiers were battling Elorians. Swords rang, arrows fired, and every heartbeat another soldier fell.

Upon each deck, the Timandrians outnumbered the Elorians ten to one. The nightfolk were falling fast. Soon King Ceranor cried in victory upon an Elorian junk; its warriors lay dead around him.

"The ship is ours!" The king brandished his bloody sword. "Seize their other ships!"

Farther east, a Timandrian galley slammed into an Elorian junk. Its prow thrust like a battering ram, snapping the junk's hull. The Elorian vessel began to sink. Its soldiers shouted and tried to jump overboard, only for Timandrian arrows to tear into them. Blood filled the water.

"Three Elorian junks against a hundred Timandrian warships," Torin said softly. "They crashed into us with fury and crushed our vanguard . . . but they cannot stop this fleet."

He looked toward the city. It loomed close now, only a mile or two away. Its crystal towers lit the plains and water. A hundred other ships moored there, but they were simply merchant and fishing vessels.

He scampered down the rope ladder and joined Bailey on the deck. She stood among dead Elorians, her shield chipped.

"The Elorian fleet is smashed," he told her. "By Idar, it's hardly a fleet at all; I think they only had three warships."

She nodded, face pale behind splotches of blood. She looked over at Pahmey. The crystal towers rose above, connected by bridges and walkways. The city now loomed as large as a mountain. Torin had thought Kingswall large; this city seemed thrice the size.

"Stay near me, Torin," Bailey said, holding her sword raised. "If we enter this city, stay near me. I'll look after you. I *promised* to look after you."

They stood at the prow, boots in blood, as the *Sunspear* sailed toward the city docks. Dozens of Timandrian warships sailed with them, archers lining their railings. They left the corpses of Elorians—hundreds of warriors—to sink in the water behind.

When Torin looked ahead, he gasped.

"Merciful Idar," he whispered.

At his side, Bailey clutched his hand. Her eyes watered. "They're going to keep fighting. By the sun, they need to flee."

Torin grimaced and watched as a hundred Elorian boats—mere fishing rafts, leisure pontoons, and merchant junks—came sailing toward the Timandrian navy.

Most of these vessels were smaller than a humble hut. Most had only a single mast. And yet they came sailing toward the fleet. Fishermen and merchant sailors steered them onward, clad in simple robes, bearing no weapons. Upon their decks they carried Elorian soldiers—two men here, three men there, a scattered army desperate to stop the sunlit onslaught.

Among the Timandrian fleet, laughter rose.

Soldiers stared at the ragtag vessels, pointed, and guffawed.

"The savages fight in dinghies!" shouted one Timandrian.

"Their ships are smaller than my tub back at home!" shouted another and brayed.

A soldier climbed a mast, pointed at the approaching rafts and pontoons, and roared with laughter. "Sink these barrels! Let's see if the savages can swim."

Torin grumbled. At his side, Bailey muttered curses.

"By the light," she said, "I almost want to abandon our ship and fight for the other side." She pointed at the approaching flotilla of fishermen and merchants. "That there is courage, Torin Greenmoat, and let there be no mistake."

Torin ground his teeth and lowered his head, guilt burning through him.

And I slew one of them, he thought. *I killed a man who simply tried to defend his home. And now I sail with an army to slay a thousand more.*

He looked up again to see his fleet crash into the approaching flotilla.

Boats shattered and the river burned.

Arrows flew through the night, shards of flame.

Small, creaky junks smashed against the Timandrian galleys and carracks. Hulls shattered. Masts collapsed. Howling with rage, Elorian warriors boarded the Timandrian ships, only for swords to hack them down. A merchant cog charged forward, laden with more explosives, and blasts of green and yellow and red whizzed everywhere, tearing through sails, hulls, and men. Soldiers leaped from deck to deck, swords clanged, and blood rose in a mist.

"Sail forth!" the king was shouting upon a ship, a three-masted carrack with a black raven figurehead. "To the city. Smash through them! To the gates!"

The Timandrian fleet crashed through the flotilla like a wolf tearing through a brood of chickens. The smaller vessels sank all around, overcome by arrows and swords.

"Anchors down!" cried the king. "Into the landing craft. To the city gates!"

At his command, Timandrian soldiers entered small rowing boats, which they lowered on ropes into the river. The troops began sailing through flotsam, corpses, and sinking dinghies toward the docks of Pahmey. Hundreds of boats covered the water, storming forth, troops filling each vessel.

"Torin!" rose a voice behind him. "Bailey! Come on, we've got a boat."

Torin turned to see Cam running across the deck of the *Sunspear*. Behind him, as always, lolloped Hem. Ash, sweat, and blood covered both boys.

"Are you all right?" Torin said. "You're bloody."

Cam snorted. "The Elorians have it much worse." He grabbed Hem and tugged him closer. "Hem here squashed one half to death. Didn't even need his sword. Just fell onto the poor bastard as the deck swayed."

The larger boy's lips trembled. "I . . . I didn't mean to! Oh, this whole place is horrible. I want to go back home."

Cam shoved him. "Oh, toughen up! This is war, old boy, and we're soldiers."

Torin sighed. He didn't want to be here either. He also wanted to go home. He looked up at Pahmey, which loomed only a few hundred yards away.

"Thousands of people live in that city," Torin said. "If the king can break through these walls, Ferius will demand them all slaughtered—the way all the villagers were slaughtered." He turned toward the two boys. "Cam. Hem. Get into one of these boats and go home. Sail west along the river. It'll be a long journey, but it'll take you back to Fairwool-by-Night."

The boys stared with wide eyes.

"Come with us, Tor!" said Cam. "Sheep dung, this place is a bloodbath. This war isn't for us. We're not soldiers. I'm just a shepherd. Hem is just a baker. You're just a gardener." He looked at Bailey. "And Bailey is . . . Bailey is . . . blimey, I have no idea what she does back home—other than bully us—but she's not a soldier either. We can't do this, Tor. Let's go home."

Torin looked back across the waters. The Elorian flotilla lay smashed or sunken. Only a few Elorian soldiers still lived, but they were falling fast. Thousands of Timandrian troops were already in their landing craft, rowing toward the city gates. More kept joining them. Torin swallowed. He spoke in a low voice.

"I cannot leave. I cannot be the man who looks away. I cannot be the man who turns aside when evil rises. If Ferius has his way, he will slay the Elorians—an entire race of people, a race I no longer believe is evil. Our people have taken the path to darkness; not only the darkness of night, but also the darkness of the soul. Future generations will look back upon this war, and they will wonder: Where were the Timandrians who stood against their leaders? Where were the just souls who said to their kings and monks, 'You cannot do this?' Let me be that man. Let me be the one who says no. I slew an innocent upon this ship. Let me redeem myself. Let me save thousands." He looked at his friends. "I don't know how I can stop this slaughter. I'm only one man, and kingdoms fight around me. But I know this: If I turn back now, this blood will forever stain my hands."

His friends looked at him silently, the two boys and Bailey, his three dearest friends in the world. Finally it was Cam who broke the silence.

"Well, by Idar's beard, we can't abandon you now, can we? Not after that speech." He clasped Torin's arm. "We're with you, laddie. Now and always.

Hem nodded and gripped Torin's other arm. "I'm not going home without Cam! I'm staying too. Maybe I can crush Ferius next."

Bailey wasn't even watching them. She was busy climbing into a rowboat that dangled over the railing. She looked up at them, blew out her breath, and rolled her eyes.

"Well, come on, boys!" she said. "You heard the babyface. We're sailing into that city. Come along!"

Torin blinked, his eyes damp. At that moment he loved his friends more than life and sunshine and all the gardens in the world. They climbed into the boat and lowered it into the water. They rowed. The river swayed, burning flotsam floated all around, and arrows whistled overhead. They oared through the wreckage of the Elorian fleet, one boat among hundreds, heading toward the walls of Pahmey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
TIGERS AND WOLVES

They rode across the black, rocky landscape of Eloria, ten thousand riders astride nightwolves. The stars shone above. Their eyes gleamed below. The Chanku Riders had left their crater, and the pack now moved on the greatest hunt of their lives. Under this moon, they did not merely hunt meat.

"We hunt fallen glory," Okado said softly, riding the great Refir, now the alpha wolf of his pack. "We hunt Pahmey."

Wolfjaw Mountain rose behind them in the night, blocking the stars. From its peak Okado had seen the distant city, but here, moving across the plains, the darkness spread into the horizon and no distant lights glowed.

Okado grinned savagely and licked his teeth. He wore his armor—a shirt of steel scales, greaves and vambraces, and a helmet shaped as a wolf's head. His true wolf wore armor too; a helmet protected his head, and spiked steel covered his chest. All around, his fellow warriors wore the same armor, and each rider bore sword, shield, and bow.

And yet Okado was afraid.

He snarled in the night, breath steaming. He wanted to crush that fear, to bury it under his rage, to feel only the lust for battle. He was Alpha. He was a great warrior. He had defeated Yorashi himself, a fighter of legend, and had risen from a lowly fisherman's son into the leader of an army. And yet, as he rode into war, he could not stop the iciness from flowing through his belly.

I've slain beasts and men, but I've never ridden against brick walls, facing an army in war, he thought. *Pahmey has warships, cannons, battlements . . . Will we crash against their walls?*

He gritted his teeth.

I will feel fear, but I will show none. I will feel fear, but I will fight nonetheless.

He turned in the saddle to face his mate. Suntai sat upon her white wolf, staring ahead with pursed lips and narrowed eyes. The wind streamed her white hair, and in one hand, she clutched her sword.

"When we reach the river," he told her, "we will swim across—you, me, and twenty of our warriors. We will leave our wolves behind. We will enter the city gates clad in cloaks, humble traders come to peddle furs. We will slay the guards. We will hold the gates open as the pack swims across the river and storms the city."

She gave him a crooked smile, one hand holding her sword, the other stroking her wolf. "It is likely, my mate, that we will die."

He shook his head. "Not under this moon. Not in this battle. Suntai, you and I will never die. We will be victorious. We will keep the gates open. Our clan will rise."

She reached across her wolf to clutch his arm. "We will kill together, my mate. We will rise together. I will spill blood at your side, under this moon and every moon. Our wolves will feast upon the hearts of our enemies."

They rode on across the rocky terrain, moving in shadow, the greatest army the Chanku Pack had ever mustered.

With strength, with honor, with the wolf's pride . . . we go home.

They climbed a rocky hill, the wind raising dust, the stars bright above. Okado and Suntai reached the hilltop first, gazed down, and saw the distant lights.

Okado inhaled sharply, tugged the reins, and squinted down at the horizon. His wolf growled beneath him. At his side, he heard Suntai's quick intake of breath.

"What devilry is this?" she said and drew her sword.

Okado's wolf pawed the earth, his drool spilling. Okado leaned forward in the saddle, staring down into the northern darkness.

Pahmey was still too far to see, lying beyond the horizon; this hill was too low. These plains should be barren. And yet across the wilderness ten thousand torches burned. The lights were moving fast, swarming toward the pack.

"It's an army," he said. "An army as large as ours, maybe larger. The city knows we're coming. They're sending troops to meet us."

Suntai hissed. Her wolf leaned forward, bristling and baring fangs.

"No, my mate," she said. "Ten thousand soldiers or more move toward us across the plains. Pahmey has no such forces. Barely three thousand troops fill that city." She snapped her teeth. "This is no army of Pahmey, Okado. This is something new. And they will meet us soon."

As the army below marched, Okado heard distant war drums, trumpets, and chants. Details began to emerge, and Okado saw banners fluttering, soldiers armed with spears and shields, and striped beasts the size of nightwolves. Every man held a crackling torch.

Paws thumped, armor clanked, and swords hissed against scabbards as the rest of his pack, thousands of wolfriders, came to stand around him atop the hill. Bows in hand, they stared downhill toward the plains and the army that approached.

"Who are they?" asked one rider, a burly man named Juro, the new beta of the pack.

His mate, a powerful woman with one eye, spat toward the approaching host. "Demons."

Okado gnashed his teeth, and the iciness in his belly grew even colder. He squinted, watching the army approach. No—these were no soldiers of Pahmey. They wore no scales, but marched bare-chested, carrying only shields for armor. Their drums beat in a thunder, stretched with leather. Red, braided beards flowed from their faces, and they wore pelts of black and orange stripes. The same fur grew from their live beasts, creatures with long whiskers, dagger-like fangs, and the colors of fire. The soldiers' cries rang across the landscape.

"Timandra! Timandra!"

Okado lost his breath. He snapped his head around to look at Suntai.

"Timandra," she whispered.

Okado stared back at the approaching host. He clenched his fists. Visions of his childhood slammed back into him: the glow of the dusk west of Oshy, the twisting plants that grew there, and the horrible lands he could see from the Nighttower . . . lands of green trees, sparkling blue waters, and a distant tower of gray stone. Timandra—the land of eternal sunlight. The realm of fire and heat. The kingdom of demons.

I saw one once, he remembered, jaw clenched. *I crept as far as I could into the dusk, traveling until the sun burned my skin and nearly blinded me. And I saw one.*

The woman he'd seen had been young, a mere girl collecting red beads that grew from the twisting plants. Her eyes had been so small, barely larger than the beads she picked, and her skin had been bronze. When she saw him, she screamed, spilled her basket, and fled. Okado wanted to follow, but when he took another step, he saw the sun. The fiery disk emerged above the horizon, as large as the moon but a thousand times brighter, burning him.

"I fled that day," he whispered. "And now ten thousand of those demons return to haunt me."

The Timandrian host was crossing the valley now, heading uphill. They banged spears against shields. They chanted in their strange tongue. Okado heard the word "Naya!" over and over—perhaps the name of their clan. Their beasts of black-and-orange stripes tugged at the leashes. Their warriors howled for blood, the wind in their red braids. They jeered at the Chanku Pack, pounded their chests, and marched toward them. Archers moved to the front of their lines.

"Okado . . ." Suntai said, fear in her voice. "Are these . . . Timandrians? From across the dusk?" She looked at him with wide eyes. "Like the one you told me you saw?"

Around him, his fellow warriors were drawing their swords. Wolves snarled. They were confused. They were afraid. But their strength and lust for war burned stronger.

Okado raised his sword.

"Chanku Pack!" he shouted. "Hear me. I am Alpha Okado! The city of Pahmey has aligned itself with demons. The elders who stole our homeland have summoned beasts from the realms of sunlight." His wolf reared beneath him. "An enemy of sunfire approaches. Show them no mercy!" He bared his teeth at the encroaching host. "Show them how we kill in the darkness."

Below in the valley, the Timandrians halted. They stared up at the pack. Their skin was the same golden color Okado remembered. Tattoos coiled across the men's bare chests and arms. Beads and bones filled their beards. Women marched among them, as fierce as their men, shouting like feral beasts, their red hair wild as flame. The true beasts among them, the striped creatures, roared and grunted and clawed the earth. The animals' whiskered, striped faces appeared on the host's banners, a thousand streams in the sky.

The Timandrian archers tugged back their bowstrings.

"Chanku!" Okado shouted and waved his sword. "Fire your arrows!"

Bowstrings twanged below. Arrows flew from the Timandrian host, gleaming in the torchlight. Okado crushed his instinct to cower. He sheathed his sword, nocked an arrow, and fired into the sky. Around him, with ten thousand battle cries, his fellow Elorian riders fired their own arrows. The whistling projectiles filled the air.

The enemy arrows rained down.

Okado raised his shield.

Arrowheads slammed into the steel, denting it. One arrowhead pierced the shield, its tip halting only an inch from Okado's face. Around him, arrows slammed into his fellow riders, clattering against shields and armor. Some punched into wolf flesh, only enraging the beasts.

"Chanku Pack!" Okado cried. "Ride! Ride for Eloria. We are the night!"

He spurred his wolf. Refir burst into a run, racing downhill toward the enemy. Around him, his pack followed, their cries a thunder. In the valley, the soldiers of sunlight fired more arrows. The shards flew through the air and slammed into wolves. One wolf at Okado's side took an arrow to the throat, stumbled, and spilled its rider onto the hillside. Two more wolves crashed down an instant later.

"Ride, warriors of the pack!" Okado shouted, standing in his stirrups, his sword pointing skyward. "Ride for darkness and fear no light. Ride for the night!"

The wolves raced downhill, the wind in their fur. The demons fired their arrows. More riders crashed down, and Okado rode on. At his side, his mate rode with bared teeth, leaning forward in the saddle, her katana raised. The torchlight blazed below, falling upon them like a shower of red blood.

With screams, lashing claws, and clashing steel, the Chanku Pack slammed into the enemy.

Spears, fire, and fangs filled the night.

Okado fought atop his wolf, swinging his sword, spraying blood. Spears thrust his way, and he knocked them aside with his shield. Two Timandrians tried to climb onto his wolf, their faces painted green, their eyes wild and their beards chinking with beads; Okado's sword slammed into their flesh, sending them tumbling. Beneath him, his wolf fought in a frenzy, biting men, tearing flesh from bone, lashing his claws at all who approached.

"Tigers!" the enemy cried. "Tigers!"

With roars, countless of the striped beasts ran forward, freed from their leashes. Each stood as large as a nightwolf, and their fur blazed in the torchlight. The tigers—that was the name their masters called them—fell upon the wolves with biting fangs and swiping claws. Blood soaked fur. Wolves and tigers fell alike.

Clouds of dust and blood hid the sky. Torches burned everywhere. The battle became like the dusk, a land between day and night, a place of darkness, light, and death. A tiger leaped at Okado and dug its fangs into his wolf. Okado swung down his sword, tearing the beast off, only for a Timandrian spear to fly his way and slice his arm.

"Suntai, stay near me!" he shouted.

His mate grinned at him, fighting atop her wolf. Blood splashed her face, and scratches ran along her arms. She swung her sword, slew a man who came between them, and laughed.

"Always, my mate! Always we will spill blood together."

The battle seemed to rage endlessly. Corpses fell everywhere. Severed limbs lay strewn among shattered spears and cloven helmets. Wounds dripped across Refir, and blood poured from many cuts across Okado. A spear knocked off scales from his armor. An axe shattered his shield. And still he fought, blade

lashing, cutting into the enemy's flesh, sending their blood across the land, crushing their corpses.

He was shouting hoarsely, blood in his mouth, when the Timandrians turned to flee.

Okado brandished his sword. Beneath him his wolf howled, blood on his teeth. The demons were running back toward the west, leaving their dead behind, clutching their wounds. Ten thousand had marched against them; barely three thousand remained to flee.

The wolfriders cheered around Okado.

"Ride them down!" shouted one.

"Slay the cowards!" cried another.

Okado wheeled his wolf around toward them.

"No!" he said. "Let the cravens flee in shame. Let them return to their land of sunlight. Let them tell their friends: The night is defended."

He panted and spat out blood. His chest heaved and his wounds blazed. Pride began to rise within him—he had led his pack to victory!—but when he gazed upon his forces, that fire died.

They had defeated the enemy, but thousands of their own dead covered the valley.

Elorian riders lay slashed with spears, eyes open, hands still clutching their swords. Dead nightwolves lay among them, mounds of bloody fur; some were burning. Their eyes all seemed to stare at Okado—his fallen warriors, the riders and wolves he had led to death and glory.

He lowered his head.

"Farewell, wolves of the pack," he said. "Your souls now hunt in the great plains beyond the stars."

Suntai's wolf mewled, nuzzling her fallen comrades. Upon the beast's back, Suntai looked around with haunted eyes.

"So many are lost," she whispered.

Okado grunted. Thousands from his pack lay dead around him, and his eyes burned, and his throat constricted. He clenched his fists. His sword trembled in his grasp.

The pack fears no death, he told himself. *The pack feels no grief. We are warriors! I am Alpha. I led the Chanku to glory. I . . .*

The dead sprawled around him. The blood painted the world. Okado bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. He struggled not to gag, not to weep, and instead let out a roar, a hoarse cry of mourning that tore across the land.

"Chanku Pack! Hear me! I promised you a city of lights. I promised you a homeland. That you will still have." He gestured his sword around at the dead. "The tyrants of Pahmey, usurpers and sorcerers, summoned demons of fire and sunlight, but we slew them. Many of our mighty warriors fell upon the stone. Their souls shine with us. They will not have died in vain. We will bury them. We will sing for their souls. We will tell them: You died so we can live. And we will not turn back." He pointed his bloody sword northward. "We will rise and take Pahmey!"

Their eyes gleamed, they raised their swords, and they shouted his name.

They sang as they buried their dead.

Their nightwolves howled at the moon.

Their flesh wounded but their eyes bright, they rode on through the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
ON THE WALLS

Koyee stood upon the walls of Pahmey, clutching her sword, and watched thousands of sunlit demons sail toward her city.

"I will fight well, Father," she whispered, the scent of fire in her nostrils. "I will defend you, Eloria. We are the night."

The Timandrians covered the Inaro River. A hundred of their warships, each one large as a temple, had smashed the Elorian fleet. Now hundreds of rowboats detached from the larger ships like baby spiders climbing off their mothers' backs. As Koyee stood upon the walls, she watched the landing craft sail through burning flotsam toward her home.

"Pahmey is now my home," she whispered as the wind blew her hair. "I will kill for you, towers of my city. I will die for you if I must."

Her heart thudded. Sweat covered her palms. She was afraid, but she would not run. She stood among soldiers, clad only in her silken dress, but she had a sword and she could fight.

"Here, take this," said the soldier beside her, the one who had first tried to send her down the wall. He handed her a bow, its metal arch shaped as a dragon, and a quiver of arrows. "These will serve you better here than your sword."

She took the weapon. "What's your name, friend?"

"Ashay," he said and bowed his head.

"I am Koyee." She met his gaze and placed a hand on his shoulder. "May we fight well, Ashay. May the constellations bless us."

He reached into his quiver and drew an arrow. Silken fletching rose upon its metal shaft. His bowstring creaked as he pulled it back.

Koyee had shot bows before, hunting upon the plains. This weapon felt familiar and comforting in her hands. She nocked an arrow. She stared down at the encroaching landing craft and the thousands of Timandrians they ferried.

"Aim for their faces, Ashay," she said softly. "Their breastplates look thick."

He snorted a laugh. "If you can aim for faces rather than breastplates, you're a better archer than I am. I'm simply going to fire downward and hope I hit something."

She glanced at him and though he wore a visor, she could swear he was grinning. She gave him a wry smile. "That works too."

The first landing craft navigated around flotsam, a sinking junk, and discarded fishing nets to reach the docks. They moored and their soldiers emerged, shouting battle cries. Clad in steel, the demons ran across the docks toward the city gates. Their banners flew high, black and gold, sporting dark birds and yellow sunbursts. Like waves toward a boulder, they rushed toward the gates.

"For Eloria!" cried an Elorian commander upon a turret, waving the moonstar banner of Qaelin. "We are the night!"

"We are the night!" Koyee repeated the cry, and a thousand voices rose with hers.

All across the walls, the soldiers of Pahmey loosed their arrows.

The shards whistled through the night. Arrows slammed into Timandrians below. Dozens of men shouted and fell. Most kept charging, arrows thrusting out of their shields.

"Elorians, fire!" shouted their commander.

Koyee tugged her bowstring back. She closed one eye. She aimed at a charging Timandrian below, a lanky demon in pale steel, the black bird upon his breastplate. Thousands of arrows flew and slammed into the enemy below, most falling harmlessly into the water or embedding into shields.

For my father, Koyee thought and fired.

Her arrow shot down and slammed into her target's neck.

The man fell dead upon the docks. His comrades raced over his corpse toward the city walls.

As Elorian arrows rained, picking out enemies, the first Timandrians crossed the boardwalk and reached the city gates. Ten men began slamming at the gates with hammers, denting the metal. Elorian soldiers stood upon the gatehouse battlements, firing arrows down. From below, Timandrian archers returned fire, their arrows clattering against the crenellations.

Koyee whipped past Ashay and ran along the wall between soldiers. Arrows whistled around her. One nearly added a scar to her face. She raced, bow clutched in her hand, her sword slung across her back, until she stood above the city gates. Elorians stood all around her, firing downward. Arrows rose from below. One slammed into a soldier only three feet away from Koyee, sending him tumbling into the city below.

She replaced the man between two merlons, pointed her bow downward, and fired.

"Aim for the archers!" Koyee shouted.

The Timandrians below, hammering at the gates, held shields above their heads. The Elorian arrows could not break through. But farther back, closer to the docks, the Timandrian archers stood exposed.

An arrow flew from below and scratched Koyee's temple. She grunted, nocked her own arrow, and fired. The projectile shot downward, slammed into an enemy archer, and sent him crashing off the docks into the water.

"Make way!" a voice cried behind Koyee. "Make way—oil!"

Koyee turned her head to see Elorian soldiers climbing the wall from the streets below. They carried a cauldron full of bubbling liquid. Below in the street, soldiers were warming a dozen more cauldrons over fires.

Koyee sucked in her breath and stepped aside.

"Men, make room!" she shouted.

She stepped back just as another volley of arrows flew from below. The cauldron reached the battlements, and more arrows flew. Some ricocheted off the cauldron. Another slammed into a soldier's face, sending him plummeting back down to the street.

Koyee ground her teeth and replaced him, holding onto the cauldron. The dead soldier had worn gloves. Her hands were exposed, and the cauldron seared her flesh. She screamed but shoved, tilting the boiler over the battlements.

The burning oil cascaded down the outer walls, showering onto the Timandrians at the gates.

Steam rolled across the gateway.

The Timandrians screamed.

The oil splashed around their shields and entered their armor. They fell and rolled. Their faces burned.

"Arrows!" Koyee shouted. "Fire arrows while their shields are down!"

She nocked and fired. Around her, a hundred other archers leaned over the battlements and fired too. Their arrows slammed into the enemy below. Some snapped against armor. Other drove through steel into flesh. Blood spilled.

"Make way—oil!" rose more cries behind her.

Koyee's heart beat madly. She stepped aside and more oil spilled. More Timandrians screamed below and fell, sizzling. More Elorian arrows rained down, tearing into the invaders.

"We will defeat them!" Koyee shouted. "We will drive them back into the light."

She fired another arrow, slaying another man, and grinned savagely. For so many moons she had lived as a thief, as a busker, and as a yezyana. Here upon the walls, in the heat of battle, she was a huntress again. She was proud and strong and she felt more alive than she had for moons in the dusty streets.

Yet for every man she slew, a hundred more emerged from the landing craft and raced ashore. The small rowboats kept coming, covering the docks like leeches. More of the sunlit demons kept charging ashore. From several boats, men lifted contraptions of metal, each the size of a carriage. They looked like great bows, ten feet long and wheeled.

As the Timandrians began wheeling these contraptions forward, Koyee's heart sank. She had read of such weapons in ancient scrolls.

"Ballistae," she whispered, a chill running through her.

Upon the docks, the Timandrians placed great arrows into the ballistae, each one larger than a man and forged of black iron. They began to turn winches, cranking back ropes.

"Slay them!" Koyee shouted. "Aim at the ballistae! Shoot the men dead!"

She fired an arrow. It flew over the Timandrians at the gates, sailed toward the docks, and slammed into one man at a winch. He fell dead, but another replaced him. Five ballistae creaked, turning toward the city.

"Fire!" Koyee shouted and shot another arrow, but it was too late.

The ballistae were loaded. They fired.

Great shards of iron, six feet long, blasted toward the city.

The walls shook.

One projectile slammed into a merlon only feet away from Koyee. The stone shattered, bricks flew, and the wall cracked. The missile kept sailing, a shard of jagged iron, to crash into a building a hundred yards behind the walls. The building collapsed. Four

more projectiles slammed into the walls, punching holes into the stone. Bricks tumbled. Koyee clutched the battlements, nearly falling.

When she righted herself and the dust settled, she saw the Timandrians loading more projectiles into the ballistae.

Koyee froze.

"They will tear the walls apart," she whispered.

The smell of gunpowder rose behind her. She turned to see a dozen Elorian soldiers racing upward, holding bronze cannons, each one five feet long and crackling.

Koyee stepped aside.

The Elorians leaped onto the battlements, aimed the cannons, and iron balls blasted downward with smoke and flame.

Timandrians fell, torn apart.

Koyee cried wordlessly, a cry of battle and fear and mourning, and she fired her arrows. Fire blazed, blood washed the walls, and thousands fell dead.

For moons I fought on the streets of Pahmey, she thought, *but this is the fight of my life. This is the fight for the night.*

She fired another arrow, breathing heavily through clenched teeth, and slew another man. From below, soldiers kept climbing up with new arrows, replenishing the quivers. Koyee kept shooting, picking out target by target. She had her bowstring pulled back when she saw him below.

Her breath died.

She felt her face pale.

They stood hundreds of yards apart—she upon the wall, he emerging from a landing craft on the docks. And yet she knew it was him. He raised his eyes and met her gaze across the battle, and Koyee's heart froze.

"The Timandrian from the dusk," she whispered. "The demon that returned my father's bones."

He wore no helmet; perhaps it had fallen off in the battle. Even from this distance, she could see his mismatched eyes, one bright and one dark. She had never forgotten that face; it was seared into her memory.

"You killed my father," she said and aimed her bow. "You will now die at the walls of my city."

She loosed her arrow. It sailed through the night. The Timandrian below knelt and raised his shield, and her arrow sank into the wood.

A ballista's projectile flew and slammed into the wall beside Koyee. She grimaced. Bricks and dust flew. She scurried aside as a merlon collapsed. By the time she peered over the battlements again, a new arrow nocked, he was gone.

Koyee gritted her teeth.

"We will see him again, Eelani," she swore and spat out dust. "We will slay him. I swear to you. I swear."

She had no hourglass, but she must have fought for a whole turn, maybe two. The Timandrians never seemed to end. They kept crashing against the walls and gates, hammering, chipping at stone and metal. Their ballistae tore at the walls. Their arrows forever flew at the battlements.

And they died.

They died by the thousands.

The oil spilled. The hand cannons fired. Elorians brought catapults to the walls, and boulders rained down upon the enemy, crushing Timandrians in their steel like crayfish under hammers. With arrow, with oil, with stone and with gunpowder, they tore them down.

Koyee screamed as she fought, weary and hoarse, her temple blazing where an arrow had scratched her, and light filled her heart.

"You killed my father," she said, teeth grinding, heart hammering. "Now we slay you all. You crushed our fleet, but now you crash against our walls, demons."

Smoke and ash hid the moon, but moonlight shone in Koyee's breast. For so long, she had tried to warn Eloria of the threat. For so long, she had lived in squalor, ignored, an urchin caked in mud, treated like some mad prophet. But now Eloria was roused. Now the night rose. Now Koyee fought for her home, and she knew they would win.

Countless corpses piled up below. Koyee fired an arrow, slew another man, and nodded.

"Now you will learn, demons, that the night does not burn."

Before she could nock another arrow, trumpets blared in the west.

Koyee turned her head . . . and lost her breath.

"Stars above," she whispered.

As around her soldiers fired arrows, slaying Timandrians at the southern gates, Koyee left her post. She raced along the wall between archers. She reached the western battlements where few sentinels stood.

There, upon the western plains, they marched.

"There are tens of thousands," she said and trembled. "Maybe hundreds of thousands."

And Koyee knew: The Timandrian fleet, a hundred ships of war, was only the vanguard. The true army, the infantry of the sun, was only now arriving.

"They are as many as the stars," she whispered. "They are as many as beads of light upon the Inaro. This is an enemy we cannot defeat." She raised her bow. "Yet I will fight them still." She raised her voice and shouted, a cry that rang out over the battle, a cry she thought could reach the stars and moon. "The sunlit demons rise in the west! Hark, Eloria! Enemy in the west—bring arrows and oil!"

She returned her eyes to the approaching army. With every breath, they grew closer, and her heart sank deeper. Thousands of them rode beasts—great, towering beasts as large as nightwolves, their necks long and maned. Countless more marched behind the riders, stretching into the horizon. They moved in perfect formation, bearing swords and torches, their lights filling the night like the dusk. Their war drums boomed. Their chants—"Timandra! Timandra!"—rolled across the plains. Towers moved among them, great constructions of wood and leather upon wheels, siege engines taller than the walls of Pahmey. Catapults rolled. Hundreds of wagons trailed behind.

This was not merely a force to drown a fleet or smash through gates. It was not even a force to crush a city.

"This is an army to light all of Eloria," Koyee whispered. "Eelani, I'm afraid."

Elorian soldiers gathered around her, clad in steel scales, spears and bows in hand. At the gates, the armies still clashed. Upon the western walls, what soldiers could be spared mustered. Koyee looked across the battlements.

How many men fight with me? she thought. *A thousand? Two thousand?*

That was all Pahmey had. It was all that could hold back the day.

"We need aid," she whispered. "We need soldiers from other cities. We need armies from across Qaelin, from across all Eloria." Her eyes stung. "We cannot face the daylight alone."

Clouds and smoke hid the moon. It began to rain, the drops tasting of ash, stinging hot against her tongue. The patter of water on steel rose like spirit drumming.

The forces below grew closer, their fires bright, and their drums beat louder than the rain, and their horns tore through the night like dying animals. They howled, their small eyes all but invisible, their faces twisted in furor. Among them moved strange

monks in yellow robes, their standards bearing golden suns. Their riders raised spears and shouted for blood. Their towers of wood and leather moved forward, wheels creaking, and Koyee saw men atop them, swords and shields bright.

Koyee raised her chin. "Be with me, stars of Eloria. Be with me in my fight and in my death."

She pulled back her bowstring.

Around her, a thousand other archers aimed.

The rain fell. The enemies marched closer until they stood outside the walls, spreading across the land, a sea of soldiers and riders and siege machines. The drumbeats stopped, the horns were lowered, and silence fell across the land, eerie after so much battle.

"For Eloria," Koyee whispered . . . and loosed her arrow.

Before her missile could hit its target, the army below surged. The battle flared with the might of ten thousand cannons.

The Elorian arrows rained down, slaying hundreds, but the enemy still stormed forth. Trebuchets twanged below and boulders flew. Koyee ducked and winced. One boulder tumbled over her head, and when she looked over her shoulder, she saw it crash into buildings. A second boulder slammed into the battlements only fifty yards away; it smashed through the wall, scattering bricks and bodies. Blood rained onto the streets behind the walls.

"Archers, do not fear the fire!" Koyee shouted. She shot another arrow. "Warriors of Eloria—do not fear the day! Fight! Slay them!"

Arrows flew from below. Ballistae and catapults fired. Boulders slammed into soldiers, into buildings, into the wall. Shards of iron, each larger than Koyee's entire body, sailed over her head to shatter buildings behind her. Bricks rained. Men

screamed. Merlons tumbled down to the plains, burying Timandrians. And still the enemy attacked.

The siege towers moved forward, drawn by great, brown beasts larger than any Koyee had ever seen, horns growing from their triangular heads. The wheels of the towers creaked, each twice her height. Upon each wooden structure, a score of Timandrians stood, firing arrows, swords at their sides. Their missiles flew around Koyee. They slammed into a man at her side, punching through his scale armor; he fell.

Koyee ducked behind a merlon. She leaned over her comrade; he lay dead. Wincing, Koyee pulled the man's helmet off and placed it over her own head. It wobbled, too large, but Koyee strapped it down as tight as she could. She rose with an arrow nocked and fired. The projectile whistled through the air and slammed into a Timandrian upon a siege tower, sending him plummeting a hundred feet to the ground.

"Hit the towers!" she shouted. "Warriors of Eloria, shoot them dead!"

At her sides, Elorians loaded wall-mounted catapults. Boulders flew and crashed into siege towers, scattering chips of wood and bodies. Three Elorians lit bronze cannons. The smell of gunpowder flared, and iron rounds blasted out, slamming into the siege engines. Thousands of arrows filled the sky, firing both ways. Men fell dead below and upon the walls.

Through fire, arrows, and tumbling boulders, three siege towers reached the walls. Three planks clanked down onto the battlements. A hundred Timandrians, covered in steel, raced onto the walls of Pahmey.

Koyee slung her bow across her shoulder and drew her father's sword.

"Be with me, Father," she whispered. "Be with me, starlight of Eloria."

Timandrians raced across the battlements toward her.

Still wearing the silk dress of a yezyana, a dead man's helmet on her head, Koyee screamed and swung her sword.

The sunlit demons towered above her. She was a slight woman, thin and short; they were broad and tall. Their swords swung down, doubled edged and wide, longer than her katana. A man rushed at her. With a shout, she raised her blade, parrying a blow. The enemy's sword was so large she thought it could snap her blade.

She screamed and swung Sheytusung down. The Timandrian blocked the blow and sparks showered. When he swung again and Koyee parried, she fell to her knees. Pain raced up her arm. With her left hand, she grabbed the shield of a fallen soldier and raised it overhead. When the enemy blade slammed into the metal, Koyee leaped sideways, swung her sword, and slammed the blade into her opponent's armor.

His steel barely even dented; it seemed thicker than Elorian armor, a plate of metal that she thought could block cannonfire. Koyee blocked another blow, screamed, and placed her back to the battlements. She shoved forward, shield held before her.

The Timandrian teetered on the edge. Koyee gave another shove to her shield and sent him tumbling down into Pahmey. He crashed to the streets, a hunk of steel, and blood seeped from his armor.

Panting, Koyee glanced around her. All across the walls, the battle raged. Swords rang. Men tumbled from the battlements and blood splashed. Another Timandrian raced toward her, laughing as he fought, and their swords locked.

They fought for what seemed an eternity. Swords rang and blood spilled and catapults fired. Arrows covered the night sky. For every Timandrian slain, ten more emerged. They leaped from siege towers. They climbed great ladders, and for every ladder the Elorians sent tumbling down, two more rose. A boulder blasted a hole through the walls a hundred yards north of Koyee, and men

fought upon the rubble. All around the city walls, wherever Koyee raced, she saw them spreading into the horizon, an endless sea of the demons, swarms of steel and torches, a light that never seemed to end.

Timandrians parted below, chanting as they wheeled forth a great contraption on ten wheels, a beast of wood and metal larger than a whale. Poles topped the machine, and chains hung from them. Upon the chains swung a battering ram painted black, shaped as the cruel bird the enemy called "Raven." Its beak thrust out, forged of iron and lit with firelight. Its eyes burned, two obsidian gems. Its claws reached out, cruel as swords. The Timandrians wheeled their champion over hills of bodies, tugged the great Raven back, and sent it swooping. The battering ram slammed into the city gates, showering fragments of metal.

Koyee fired down her arrows. Around her, what remained of the defenses—barely a hundred bloodied men—fired with her. And still the iron raven swung. Its beak and claws tore through the gates, bending and snapping metal. The Timandrians cheered as their ram shattered the doors, and Koyee knew: It was over.

"Down into the streets!" she shouted, voice hoarse with smoke. Blood dripped from her head across her shoulder. "Fight them in the city, warriors of Eloria! Give them no rest! Fight them in every alley."

She raced down the wall, sword and shield raised, to see the enemy march through the shattered gates.

Dozens entered through the archway, swords and armor bright, their torches lit. Behind them, a hundred thousand more spread across the night.

Koyee walked down the street and faced them. Around her, a mere hundred Elorian soldiers gathered, their armor dented, their wounds bleeding, their arms shaking with weakness. Koyee's heart thrashed and her legs shook, but she refused to run. She stood firmly, facing the horde at the gates, and raised her sword.

"I am Koyee of Eloria!" she called out to them. "I am a warrior of the night. I am a huntress of the moonlit plains. This is my city. This is my land. You cannot enter. Return to the day! This city is forbidden to you. You cannot enter. We are the night!"

Their eyes mocked her and they brandished their swords. They marched toward her, and Koyee raised her chin and prepared to kill and die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
BETWEEN WISDOM AND WOLVES

As they rode on, Okado wanted to sing for glory, to brandish his sword, to shout until he was hoarse about courage and honor and their rise to might. Yet as the Chanku Clan continued along the plains, down to half their strength, he could not stop seeing the dead.

The heat of battle had stirred him; tiger fangs, enemy spears, and spraying blood were fuel to a warrior's flames. It was the silence after the battle that still pierced him. The riders who would never more sing. The wolves who lay on their sides, blood trickling from their silenced jaws. The eyes staring at him, still and glassy. Five thousand riders and five thousand wolves had fallen upon the plains—riders of the Chanku Pack, warriors of the Qaelin nation, proud Elorians of the dark half of the world.

Five thousand gone.

He looked at Suntai, who rode beside him, and saw the same ghosts in her eyes. In those large, indigo orbs they were still dying—so many of their brothers and sisters.

The remainder of their warriors rode behind them. Okado moved his wolf to press up against Suntai's. He spoke in a low voice for only her ears.

"Yorashi wanted us to travel south," he said. "He wanted to forget Pahmey and its glory. He wanted to seek a life of peace." His hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. "Suntai . . . was I wrong to refuse him?"

She raised her chin, reached out, and clasped his arm. "You are our alpha now. You proved your strength. We will follow you."

Strength. What was strength when five thousand lay dead? When he returned to their crater, in victory or defeat, he would find children, elders, and parents all grieving for their fallen. How would his strength help them then?

He gritted his teeth.

"Yes, Suntai, I am strong."

He cursed himself for his moment of weakness. What kind of alpha spoke of mourning, of uncertainty, of cowardice? Okado would not hold his new title for long if the others knew his doubts. His new beta, the brutish Juro, would slay him, feed his heart to his wolf, and rule instead.

For we are the pack. All we know is strength. That strength will see us triumph . . . or die in the dark.

They traveled across the land, bloodied but still holding their heads high, until they saw the Inaro River, its water silver in the moonlight. Another mile and the city of Pahmey appeared in the distance, bright upon the northern riverbanks.

First its towers rose from the horizon, shining like crystals growing from a cave floor. Blue, green, and pale pink, they reached toward the sky, hands calling lost children home. The tallest among them held a glass dome; from this tower the Chanku ancestors had once ruled, and now the cruel elders reigned.

"Behold the light of Pahmey," Okado said softly. "Behold our home that was lost, our home that we will reclaim."

As the pack kept moving, the city kept rising, revealing a hill covered with houses, temples, and pagodas with tiers of tiled roofs. Another mile, and they could see the city walls . . . and for the second time since leaving the crater, Okado lost his breath.

He tugged the reins, halting his mount.

"Stars of the wolf," Suntai whispered at his side, coming to a stop beside him.

Okado stared, unable to breathe, unable to move.

We did not defeat the armies of sunlight, he realized. *We only severed a single arm from a beast of endless tentacles.*

A hundred thousand troops or more gathered around Pahmey, their torches burning, a swarm of ants surrounding a fallen morsel. They sailed upon the river on a hundred ships, each topped with three masts, each large enough to hold a thousand men. They covered the plains, their armor bright, slamming against the walls. Their catapults fired. Their siege towers, as tall as the fabled walls of Pahmey, held archers and swordsmen. Their banners fluttered in the wind, showing black birds against golden fields. It was a different clan that swarmed below—not the clan of the tiger—but they too were Timandrians. They too were warriors of sunlight.

His fellow wolves came to stand around him. They stared across the water as the sunlit demons crushed the city of Pahmey.

"The Pahmey elders never summoned these demons," Okado said, and that fear grew inside him. "They never sent the army our way." He looked at his mate. "This is no battle between Chanku and Pahmey. This is an invasion of day into night."

The enemy's distant chants of "Timandra!" rolled across the water. Their horns blared and their drums beat. Their shouts rose and fell like stormy waves. For miles, their torchlight spread. Their boulders and arrows covered the sky, pounding the city. The people of Pahmey fought with cannons, bows, and swords, but could not hold back the storm. Even from here, a mile across the water, Okado could smell the blood and death.

He raised his sword, then lowered it. He opened his mouth to shout for victory, then closed it. He let Refir take a step toward the water, ready to swim across, then pulled the wolf back. That old fear flared, no longer icy cold, but all consuming,

indistinguishable from heat, burning him and freezing his innards all at once.

I am a warrior! called a voice inside him. *I am an alpha! How can I know fear? How can I turn away from battle?*

His clan was watching him, awaiting his order, awaiting his charge at the enemy. Okado could barely breathe. He could not stop his fists from shaking, and he knew the clan noticed. Murmurs rose among them. If he was weak, they would tear him apart. If he could not storm to war, the strongest and bravest among them, they would feed his heart to the wolves.

He looked at the host ahead, a landscape of demons. Upon the plains, only ten thousand Timandrians had halved his clan. Here ahead waited a host ten times the size, and Okado knew: *We cannot win this battle.*

He knew his duty. He knew the code of Chanku honor. *Dare I disobey my honor now . . . to save the lives of my warriors, even if they slay me for it?*

"Riders!"

The distant, sputtering voice rose from the river. Okado squinted and saw the swimmer. The man looked ready to drown. He slapped at the water, an arrow in his shoulder, spitting out water. He cried out to them, a young Elorian man, face pale and lips blue.

"Riders of Eloria!"

Okado turned to his riders. "Wait here."

The fear still coursing through him, he spurred his wolf. Refir was wounded, but he raced into the water and began to swim, Okado on his back. The current tugged them eastward, but Refir swam mightily. The water rose up to Okado's waist, icy cold. The drowning man gave a last sputter and wave and then sank; only the arrow embedded in his shoulder remained above the surface.

"Refir, grab him!" Okado said.

The wolf swam faster, sank his head into the water, and tugged back. In his jaws, he held the drowning man's collar. The man was still alive, coughing water, his blood trickling. Okado pulled him onto the saddle.

They swam back to the southern riverbank, joining the rest of the pack. Okado dismounted and laid the man down, where he shivered and coughed up more water.

Around him, the clan riders grumbled.

"This one is a soldier of Pahmey!" said the beefy Juro. "He wears the silver tunic of their pikemen. He is the enemy."

Others shouted and pointed their swords at the man, threatening torture or death. The half-drowned soldier shivered, grabbed Okado's wrist, and stared into his eyes.

"You are Chanku riders," he said. "But you are no longer our enemies. Help us, riders. Help us." His lips shook and he could hardly speak. "Timandra attacks! The sunlit demons swarm. They seek to slay all Elorians. They seek to light all the night. Help us . . . help us . . ."

Okado looked at his fellow riders. They stared back, swords ready, eyes hard. Their wolves bared their fangs, lusting to taste the blood of their enemies. But behind them . . . far beyond the miles of rock and shadow, Okado imagined their wives, their children, their elders. And he saw them waiting for warriors who would not return. He turned to look at Suntai, and their gazes met. His mate's eyes did not crave battle; they were soft, understanding, and wise.

I love you, Suntai, he thought—words he would never dare speak, words an alpha, strong and feeling nothing but bloodlust, would never utter. *We will forever ride together.*

He climbed back onto his wolf and the beast reared. Okado called out to his people.

"The demons of sunlight fight our enemies in Pahmey. We rode here to find a war not ours. The Chanku Pack will return

home. We will not help the city that exiled us. We return to our crater. We return to our families."

He looked again at Suntai and saw her eyes dampen. She nodded in approval, a small smile trembling on her lips. She knew what this cost him.

The rest of the riders showed no such understanding. Their lips peeled back in snarls. They bellowed. Their wolves cried out as if they too had understood his words. Swords rose tall.

"Does an alpha cower from battle?" demanded his beta, the towering Juro.

"We are Chanku riders!" shouted another, a wild woman of the blade. "We do not flee battle. We will charge the enemy."

"Our alpha is weak!" cried a third rider.

"Let us storm the enemy for glory, for the honor of the wolf!"

Okado wheeled his wolf from one rider to another, curling his lip. "You will not disobey me. I am Alpha Okado. I defeated Yorashi. I rule this pack. We will not die in a war not ours. We return to—"

"I will not return as a coward, tail between my legs," said Juro and spat. "Okado, you are weak. You are a pup. What kind of alpha turns away from a battle of glory?"

A wise one, Okado thought. *A leader who cares more for the life of his people than death and honor.* He gripped his sword as the horror surged through him. *A leader like the one I cast out. A leader like Yorashi . . . like the one I must become.*

Yet how could he speak these words to men who lusted only to kill, to die, to fight though no hope shone? He rode his wolf away from the riverbanks, moving through the pack, heading back south.

"Follow, riders!" he said. "We will leave this city to its fate. We return home."

Faces dour, some still grumbling, the riders parted, letting him move through the pack. All but Juro. Snarling, the beta rode to block Okado's path.

"No," he said. "No, Okado. I will not follow you. You are weak. You are no alpha." He brandished his sword and roared. "I challenge you! A battle of wolves."

The clan raised their voices, forming a ring around the two. "Battle of wolves! Battle of wolves!"

With a caustic grin, Juro spurred his mount and came charging toward Okado, swinging his katana.

Okado hissed, charged upon his own wolf, and swung his own sword.

The wolves and blades crashed together.

Fangs bit into fur. Steel rang.

The largest rider in the pack, Juro laughed as he fought. He swung his sword down, a great cleaver, and Okado—strong but slimmer—blocked the blade. His rage blazed.

I will not let this man usurp me. I will not let him kill us all. He swung his blade; it clashed against Juro's armor, raising sparks but doing the man no harm. *I will not see our clan destroyed for his pride.*

Juro's wolf lunged. Claws dug into Refir, and the wolf fell. Okado fell with him, raised his sword, and parried another blow. Upon his wolf, Juro was laughing, scales missing from his armor, his blade slamming down again and again. Lying on the ground, his wolf whimpering beside him, Okado blocked the blows. Juro's wolf clawed at his chest and arms. The crowd roared and somewhere in the distance Suntai cried his name.

Suntai . . .

Okado knew what would happen if he fell. Juro could claim Suntai as a second mate. She would have to endure him, to serve him, to mate with him, even bear his children, until another defeated him.

As claws and blade lashed down against him, it was the thought of Suntai that pulled Okado to his feet.

Juro's sword cut into his shoulder, spraying blood.

Okado leaped onto his enemy's wolf.

The beast bucked below them. The two men fought upon the wolf's back. Juro reached out, clutched Okado's throat, and squeezed. His sword clanged against armor. Okado couldn't scream, couldn't breathe, but he kept seeing Suntai's eyes . . . eyes that loved him, eyes he would not see darkened.

"Yes, suffocate for me, coward," Juro said, grinning as he squeezed. "I will not give you the honor of dying upon the blade. Warriors die upon steel. You will die like an omega."

As Juro squeezed his throat and darkness spread across the world, Okado tossed down his sword.

Stars shone before his eyes.

He drew his dagger and drove it forward.

The blade slammed into Juro's chest, punching through armor and into flesh.

The fingers loosened around his throat.

With a great breath of air, Okado twisted his blade.

"But you, Juro," he rasped, "you I will gladly kill with steel."

The beta gasped, eyes wide, blood spilling. Okado shoved the blade deeper, and Juro tumbled off his wolf. He thudded against the ground.

Breath heavy and his own blood dripping, Okado dismounted and knelt above his foe. Blood splashed his fingers as he worked, cutting and digging. When he ripped out his enemy's heart, the clan roared and chanted his name.

"Feast upon his strength, Refir," Okado said, offering the heart to his wolf.

Refir still lay on the ground, wound bleeding, but he ate and the heart gave him strength. The nightwolf rose to his feet, and Okado sat in his saddle again. He looked upon his clan and saw

approval in their eyes. Suntai stared at him, chin raised and eyes bright.

"Chanku Pack!" Okado shouted, voice hoarse, a mere rasp like steel on leather. "I am your alpha! I will slay any who challenge me. I will lead you to thrive, my pack. I will lead you to strength. Our glory lies upon the horizon, but not here. Not now. The city we craved is sacked; our old enemies, the elders of those towers, are fallen. We are avenged. We leave with heads high, our honor intact." He began to ride south. "Follow, Chanku riders. We are the night!"

They rode south, away from the city of Pahmey, taking with them its wounded soldier but leaving the dead Juro. As he rode ahead of the pack, his mate at his side, Okado thought back to their council upon Wolfjaw Mountain.

I thought you weak, Yorashi. I thought you a coward. Okado squared his jaw, eyes burning. *But you are not. You were a leader. Perhaps a true leader needs less blind strength . . . and more wisdom.*

He hoped that Yorashi would find another pack somewhere in the wilderness, another place to belong, to grow old, to survive. So few survived in the wildness of endless night.

"But we will," Okado vowed into the wind. "I will lead my pack not for glory and honor, but for life."

The city vanished behind, and the distant sounds of war drums and screams faded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
OLD GHOSTS

The gateway loomed above him, carved of indigo bricks, their facades sporting golden reliefs of moons and stars. The walls towered above Torin, a hundred feet tall, ending with battlements scarred and smashed by war. The doorways, forged of bronze, lay shattered and bent, mere scrap metal. Ahead of Torin, his fellow soldiers marched into the city, boots thudding in unison, banners and swords raised.

"Victory!" they shouted. "The city is ours! Slay every enemy soldier you find."

Torin stood in the wreckage of the docks, covered in blood and ash, arrows in his shield. After losing his armor in the river, he now wore a new, ill-fitting breastplate; he winced to remember pulling it off a corpse. His friends stood beside him, similarly clad in scavenged armor, their faces sooty and their wounds dripping.

"Torin . . ." Bailey said and clutched his arm, fear in her eyes. "Will they kill everyone inside? Will they attack only soldiers, or will they destroy the city?"

He swallowed, throat tight. "I don't know. But we must enter with them. We must do what we can to stop this city from crumbling. I cannot let this be another massacre . . . not as I wear this armor, bearing this sigil."

Bailey lowered her head. A tear drew a line through the dirt caking her cheek. "Are you sure? Maybe we should just run. We can grab a boat. We can sail home." She looked up at him, eyes damp. "You don't have to do this. You can still turn back."

He stared at the smashed gates and the soldiers marching through. From within the city, he heard the clanging of swords and screams of dying men. They were still fighting in there, the last survivors of the Elorian defense clashing against the enemy, fighting even now with the gates smashed, with all hope for them lost.

"She's in there," he whispered. "I saw her, Bailey. I saw her on the walls and she met my eyes. The girl with the scarred face."

Bailey shook her head, braids swaying. "What girl, Torin? Who?" She clutched his hand. "Who are you talking about?"

She no longer stood upon the walls, but Torin could see her again in his memory. A young woman, hair long and white and smooth, eyes large and lavender. Three scars rifted her face. The pain seared through him.

"It was last spring. Do you remember when I wheeled the bones into the dusk, the remains of the Elorian our village burned?"

Bailey nodded. "Of course."

"I saw her then. A young Elorian woman. I left the bones near her, and she seemed . . . haunted, in mourning. I've often wondered if she was the daughter of the man we burned. Bailey, I cannot let more die. Part of this blood is on our hands. I must do what I can to protect that woman . . . to protect everyone I still can."

She grabbed his shoulders and stared into his eyes. "How?"

"The greatest danger to Eloria is not swords, not arrows, not catapults—it's words. Words ignite the fires of war. Words kill more innocents than swords. Those evil words still spill from Ferius's lips into the king's ears."

"The king will not listen to you," she said. "If Ferius urges genocide, the king will obey . . . like in the village." She shook her head. "How can we stop this?"

Torin looked at the bodies that lay around the city walls. His voice was low.

"If I cannot preach peace, I must silence the words of war. I must kill Ferius." He looked back at Bailey and saw the horror in her eyes; the same horror churned in his belly. "In the chaos of battle, if Ferius sends soldiers to slay the innocent, I must slay him. I must."

Bailey touched his cheek, and tears streamed from her eyes. "You're not a killer, Torin."

He looked at the blood on his sword. "I am now. Will you come with me?"

She dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Always. Into this city and into the very heart of the night." She wiped tears from her eyes. "Then come on, lazy! Into the city. Let's find that bastard and stick a sword in his gut."

Torin looked back at the walls, hoping to see the woman again, but saw only blood and smashed stones. He walked forward, sword drawn, stepping over debris, shattered shields, and corpses. He joined the marching troops. Among the thousands, covered in blood and dust, he entered the city of Pahmey.

This ends now, Ferius, he thought, gripping his sword to stop his hand from trembling. *I will find you in this city . . . and I will kill you.*

* * * * *

She stood, shaking, sword in hand. Around her stood a hundred Elorian warriors, scale armor chipped and swords dented, the last defenders of Pahmey. All others lay dead in the Inaro or the rubble along the walls.

Koyee held her blade tight as before her the hordes marched, ten by ten, a formation of perfect precision, a machine of metal and fire. Into Pahmey they came—the sunlit demons, as

plentiful as stars in the sky. A hundred yards separated them from Koyee, then ninety, and soon they moved only heartbeats away.

"Be brave, my friends," Koyee said softly. "Be brave for Eloria."

One man at her side, a tall Elorian with a scratch along his face, turned and fled. Another joined him and a dozen followed. Yet still Koyee stood on the street, awaiting the marching enemy. Her sword had not yet quenched its thirst.

The Timandrians ahead stared at her and her meager force. They looked at one another and snickered. Their leader, a man in plate armor, his helmet shaped as a bird of gold and onyx, pointed his blade forward. He spoke in his tongue, which Koyee did not understand, but she could hear the words in his tone.

"Slay them," said this king of demons. "Slay them all."

The Timandrians howled and charged.

Koyee snarled and raised her sword.

A shadow darted.

A small figure, no taller than her waist, burst out from an alley. The shadow scurried ahead and hands grabbed Koyee. She gasped and almost dropped her sword.

"Flee, Koyee Mai!" rose a high voice. "Flee!"

She gasped. It was Maniko! Maniko, the dwarf who had taught her the flute!

His hands were small but determined, tugging her sideways. She tried to resist, but Maniko was too strong and quick. The Timandrians surged toward them. Elorian soldiers crashed against the enemy. Swords rang and blood spilled all around.

"Come, Koyee Mai! Come and hide."

She was too weary, too dazzled to resist him. He dragged her into a dark alley. Outside on the boulevard, swords crashed, men fell, and blood spilled.

"Maniko, I must fight with them," Koyee said, struggling to free herself from his grasp.

He clung to her, barely more than half her height, but his arms were wide and his grip desperate. Dust and droplets of blood caked his flowing beard.

"Please, Koyee," he said, eyes entreating, holding her in the shadows. "This is not the way. You will die out there."

She shook her head, eyes stinging. "I cannot abandon Eloria."

"You will not." He pulled her deeper into the shadows. "Koyee Mai, look at me. Look. Listen to me."

She turned away from the battle. In the darkness of the alley, she looked down at him. A scratch ran along his face, and his eyes shone with tears.

"Dearest Maniko," she said, knelt, and embraced him. "My friend."

Her body shook with weariness. She had been fighting for what felt like many turns of the hourglass, never resting, never eating or drinking. Her limbs trembled and her head swam.

Maniko held her close. "Koyee, this is not the way. You are like me. You are a busker. You are a soul of the shadows, a warrior of the streets. Haven't you and I always fought in the shadows?" He touched the wound on her temple. "Fight in the shadows again. From the roofs. From alleyways. From windows and dark corners. Not out there in lantern-lit boulevards."

She looked back out the alleyway. Between the houses, she saw the Timandrians march on. Bodies of Elorians littered the street. The blood of the night flowed.

She turned back to Maniko. "Do you know how to fight?"

He reached into his boot, pulled out a knife, and grinned. "I've been living on the streets of Pahmey for over forty years. Yes, moonchild. I know how to fight." He held her arm. "Come with me. We will slay the demons together."

She smiled softly. "Maniko, you are small and can scurry through shadows, but I am fast and I can climb walls and leap

between roofs. Let the alleyways be your domain; let the rooftops be mine." She kissed his cheek. "We will play music together again."

She left him there, scuttled up the wall like she would as a thief, and stood upon the rooftops. She looked down at her friend, then raced along the roof and would not look back. The truth she kept to herself.

"I cannot bear to see you die, Maniko," she whispered. "I would prefer to die alone in blood and shadow than lose my friend."

She dropped down to hands and knees, crept along the roof to the boulevard, and gazed down. Thousands of Timandrians now marched through the city; more kept streaming in. Koyee sucked in her breath and drew an arrow; she had only seven left. She tugged back her bowstring. She fired. She stayed just long enough to see a man fall dead, then turned and fled across the roofs.

"You smashed us in the water," she whispered. "You crushed us on the walls. But now . . . now a battle of shadows begins. Now Eloria fights in alleyways and upon rooftops. Now we will bleed you like never before."

She leaped onto the dome of a mushroom farm, raced around its top, and jumped. As she sailed over a street, she shot another arrow. She saw a Timandrian fall before she landed on the opposite roof and ran onward.

She raced across the city, leaping from roof to dome to steeple. She felt like a bird of the night, flying over Pahmey, a shadow under the starlight. In every street, the enemy marched, poison clogging the veins of her city. For this was her city now; this had become her home. On the rough streets of the dregs, in the glittering hilltop dens, and upon the battlements, she had bled for this city, and she had killed for this city, and this was the beat of her heart. This was her new lodestar. And so she kept running.

She kept leaping. She kept firing her arrows, sending death into their ranks. She was down to only three arrows, then two, and they were a hundred thousand, but she ran and fought on.

"I will slay you with arrows until they are gone," she vowed in the darkness, standing upon a steeple of crystal. "I will fight you with my sword until it is chipped and dented beyond use. And then I will fight you with tooth and nail." The wind billowed her hair, and she clutched the steeple and stared down into the streets. "I am Koyee. I am a daughter of the night. I will not rest until your light fades or until I join my father, whom you slew."

She ran. She vaulted over a street. She fired another arrow, landed on a rooftop, and ran on.

By the time she had fired her last arrow, the Timandrians had reached the city hilltop and were marching to the palace. She saw no more Elorians; the people hid in homes, temples, theaters, and alleys. Everywhere she looked she saw the sunlit demons, their torches casting red light, their armor bright, their voices chanting for victory. No one else was emerging to fight; all hid or lay dead.

"So I will fight alone," Koyee said into the wind.

She raced across tiled roofs, her feet bare, her quiver empty. In the firelight of war, the city seemed a foreign place. She did not realize what roofs she leaped across until she was there.

She froze. She sucked in her breath.

She was standing atop the Fat Philosopher, that old tavern, gazing down upon Bluefeather Corner where—for so long—she would play her flute.

"My old home," she whispered, and the memories flooded her, as biting and quick as an arrow's jab. She saw herself standing here again, clad in the tattered furs of a fisherman's daughter, playing in the muck, sleeping by the trash bin in the alley. Despite the war flowing through Pahmey, this little nook had not changed. The bearded soothsayer still sat upon his box, stroking his beard,

his old eyes almost blind. The bluefeathers still stood in their corral, clacking their silver beaks and scratching the earth. Her old corner, where she had stood for so long, seemed barren and sad to her, a memory tinged with sorrow even now as the night burned.

Movement across the street caught her eye. She turned to see several Timandrians emerging from an alleyway, holding lanterns. Koyee narrowed her eyes and caught her breath. Unlike the others, these Timandrians wore no armor and carried no swords. Instead, they wore yellow robes and bore flanged maces.

"What new demons are these, Eelani?" Koyee whispered, though she could no longer feel her friend upon her shoulder. Perhaps Eelani had fled. Perhaps she had burned in the battle.

The Timandrians below spat out words. Disgust and scorn dripped from their voices. Koyee could not understand their language, but she understood their tone. One of the demons kicked a stray jar while another pointed at scattered refuse and snorted.

They think our city a sty, Koyee thought, *but they are worse filth than anything in the dregs.* She wished she still had arrows to fire upon them.

One of the demons raised his head, and Koyee stepped back, heart pounding. She was sure he'd spotted her upon the roof, but when she disappeared into the shadows, she heard the demon chanting. It sounded like a prayer, and Koyee understood.

These are not soldiers. They are monks . . . monks of the cruel sun that burns across the dusk.

She lay upon her stomach, crawled to the roof edge, and peered down.

One of the monks spat, muttered what sounded like a curse, and approached the old soothsayer. The Timandrian was short and squat, his shoulders wide and his scraggly, black hair thinning. His eyes were far set, and his thin lips twisted into a sneer. When

he reached the soothsayer, the monk prodded the old man with his boot.

Koyee snarled and prepared to jump down but stopped herself; there were eight of them—too many for her to defeat. She watched from the roof.

"Master!" said the soothsayer, too old and weary to rise. "Don't hurt me, Master."

The squat Timandrian monk hissed. "Ferius!" he said, smirked, and pointed at himself. "Ferius."

The soothsayer bowed his head. "Master Ferius! Please do not hurt an old man."

Ferius looked back at his fellow monks, snickered, then kicked the soothsayer in the stomach.

Koyee gasped.

The soothsayer fell over, coughing, and Ferius kicked him again and laughed. The Timandrian raised his mace high, prepared to strike the killing blow.

This time Koyee could not stop herself. She leaped off the roof. Graceful as a nightwolf, she landed upon the street, drew her sword, and sliced the air.

"You will not touch him," she said. "He is mine to protect. Stand back, demons, or taste my steel."

The monks turned toward her, their eyes widened . . . and they laughed.

Koyee swung Sheytusung again; the blade whistled through the air. She realized how she must have looked: a slim woman, clad in only a tattered silk dress, her helmet too large and grime coating her bare feet. She brandished her blade. Each of the Timandrians was larger than her, and their maces could snap both her sword and bones, yet she would not back down.

Maniko would want me to flee, she thought, *but I cannot let more die.*

"Come die at my blade," she said.

They raised their maces and charged toward her.

Koyee screamed and ran to meet them.

Shadows leaped from the rooftops.

With a flutter of cloaks and the flash of blades, the Dust Face Ghosts landed in the street.

"Hello again, Halfsmile!" cried Longarm. The one-armed woman gave her a nod, then thrust her spear at a monk.

Around her, the other Ghosts—the burly twins, the quick Earwig, and even tiny Whisper—lunged at the enemy. Their blades and clubs swung.

The monks cursed. Koyee gave a battle cry and charged.

She swung her blade at a bald, gangly monk. He parried with his mace. Koyee screamed, sure her sword would break, but this was the blade of a master smith. She knelt and swung again, and her sword sliced into her enemy's legs. With a curse, the monk fell. He lashed his mace again but missed. Koyee leaped skyward, then drove her sword down as she descended. Her blade pierced the monk's chest.

Kneeling above the corpse, she looked up. The Ghosts were fighting around her. In their corral, the bluefeathers were cawing madly. Another monk came running her way. Koyee swung her sword. A mace slammed against her thigh and she yowled. She drove her blade downward, driving it through the Timandrian's shoulder and cleaving his torso. He fell dead.

"Halfsmile!" Earwig said with a grin, scrawny, his knees scraped as always. "You are a fighter, Halfsmile!"

He lashed his own weapon, a chipped dagger, toward a monk. The man was waving a mace at the boy, but was moving too slowly, unable to land his blows.

"Earwig, you focus on the fight!" Koyee shouted back. "You—"

The one-eared boy swung his dagger and winked. He was still grinning at her as the mace slammed into his head.

"Earwig!" Koyee screamed.

Horror shattered her heart. The boy fell, head cracked open. Screaming, Koyee raced toward the monk who'd slain him. She waved her sword madly. The man barely saw her coming; she sliced his belly open and spun around, panting.

Earwig lay at her feet. Before Koyee could even kneel beside him, screams rose ahead.

She saw one of the twins, tall and gaunt and pale, take a mace to his chest. Ribs cracked. His eyes closed, and the boy fell. His club thumped down by his body.

Koyee screamed. A monk came at her, mace swinging. Koyee ducked and the weapon whooshed over her head. She thrust Sheytusung upward, piercing the man's belly, and pulled the sword back with a shower of blood.

She leaped into the air, stepped over the Timandrian as he fell, and raced toward the twins.

One still lay upon the street, chest shattered. His brother bellowed to the sky, kneeling over his fallen sibling. He was weeping and trying to revive his brother when a monk clubbed his head.

Koyee spun from side to side, blade swinging, holding back the enemies. Four monks still lived . . . and only two Dust Face Ghosts.

"Run, Whisper!" Koyee screamed. "Run!"

The little girl, the smallest and dearest of the Ghosts, stared up from a pool of blood. She held a dagger in her trembling hands.

"I . . . I have to fight with you, Halfsmile," the child whispered. "I . . ."

Whisper never even saw the blow coming.

The monk—the short, stocky Ferius—crept up behind the girl and swung his mace.

The flanged head slammed into Whisper's skull, cracking it open. The girl was dead before she hit the ground.

"No . . ." Koyee whispered. Tears filled her eyes and her whisper rose to a howl. "No! She was only a child, you bastards! She was only a little girl . . ."

Tears flowing, Koyee screamed and ran toward the four remaining monks.

She screamed and wept as she fought. Her feet stepped on the blood of her fallen friends. She swung Sheytusung, cut one man's legs out from under him, and slammed the sword down. She suffered a mace's blow to her right arm. It hung uselessly, swelling up, maybe broken, but Koyee barely felt the pain. She took her sword into her left hand and fought on, shouting, and cut another man down.

"Halfsmile!" Longarm said, fighting at her side; she was the only Ghost still alive. "Halfsmile, we die here in the night, but I am proud. I am proud to die with a friend."

Koyee shook her head as she swung her blade, parrying a mace blow. "We do not die. Not here. Not now. Not in this street."

The tall, one-armed woman gave her a thin smile. "You have taught me much, Koyee. That is your true name, is it not?" She parried a mace's blow and met Koyee's gaze again. "May the moonlight bless you, daughter of Eloria."

Still smiling thinly, Longarm thrust her spear. She impaled one Timandrian before Ferius, still smirking, slammed his mace into her back.

"Longarm!" Koyee shouted; she was dueling another monk and could only glance at her friend, unable to help.

Longarm fell to her knees. She looked up at Koyee. She gave her one nod . . . just one nod and a smile. No fear filled her eyes. Only pride.

Pride in me, Koyee realized.

Ferius swung his mace again.

Koyee looked away, tears on her cheeks.

With a scream, she swiped her blade, knocked a mace's blow aside, and slew the Timandrian she fought.

She spun around, bloodied sword raised.

Corpses littered the alley. All the Dust Face Ghosts lay dead: the strong twins, the quick Earwig, the noble Longarm, and little Whisper. Around them lay the corpses of Timandrians, blood soaking their robes.

The old soothsayer, at least, had fled.

I saved him, Koyee thought, shaking. *At least I saved a life.*

Only one monk remained standing. He came walking toward her, mace dripping the blood of her friends. He gave her a cruel, tight grin—a wolf's grin.

"Ferius," she said.

He took a step closer to her.

"Koyee," he said and nodded.

She screamed and ran toward him.

His grin widened and he swung his mace.

The weapons clashed and pain shot up Koyee's arm. Ferius snarled—perhaps he'd thought his heavy weapon would shatter her thin steel. His eyes narrowed and he drove his mace downward.

Koyee jumped aside, and the mace hit the ground, shattering a cobblestone. She thrust her sword again, but he leaped back and her blade only sliced his cloak, leaving his skin unscathed.

"You should run!" Koyee screamed and thrust her sword. "I will show you no mercy."

He scuttled backward, and her blade pierced the air, but then he charged again. His mace drove her sword aside and swung into her right arm.

She heard the bone *crack*.

Koyee screamed.

Pain blazed through her. She could barely see. Blindly she thrust her sword again, cutting only air. Agony flooded her. Through the haze, she saw Ferius take a step backward. He was laughing.

Struggling to remain conscious, Koyee ran at him, sword thrusting.

He stepped aside, dodging the blow, and swung his weapon. The flanged head slammed into her back.

Koyee fell.

Her knees hit the ground.

She turned her head, wincing. The world blurred. Ferius stood above her, smiling his mocking smile, and said words in his language. She knew that he was cursing her.

Koyee gave one last thrust of the blade, barely able to hold it up. With another swing of his mace, he crushed her fingers and sent Sheytusung flying.

"Be safe, Eelani," she whispered. "Be safe without me. Find a new friend." She looked up and through the smoke of battle, she could see the stars and moon. "I rise now to my parents, to my friends, and to peace."

Ferius raised his mace above her head.

Koyee closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and thought of the tranquil waters of her home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
STEEL AND FEATHERS

Torin raced through the streets, heart thrashing.

"I saw him!" he shouted. "I saw Ferius ahead with a group of his thugs."

His friends ran at his sides. Bailey snarled and pumped her arms. Cam and Hem teetered behind, armor ill-fitting and breath puffing. All across the city, Timandrian troops marched, flowing down every boulevard, road, and alleyway, seeking fighters, killing any Elorian they found bearing a weapon.

Torin clenched his fists as he ran, remembering the monk's words.

I will slay every man, woman, and child in this city . . . and you will watch, Torin. You will watch them burn.

"Torin!" Hem shouted behind, breathing heavily. His cheeks were red and soaked with sweat. "Torin, I can't . . . I can't run!"

Cam too sweated. He spat and tugged his friend along. "Come on, Hem. We have to stop that bastard monk before he burns this whole damn city."

Torin growled and kept running. The monks had disappeared around a street corner ahead, but when Torin emerged around the bend, he saw only shadows. A dozen alleyways stretched off the road like doors along a corridor. Somewhere in the distance, the sounds of battle rose. Torin heard Ferius cackling and an Elorian shouting in her tongue, her voice pained.

"By Idar's beard, he's murdering people already," Torin muttered. "We end this now. Whatever alley he ran into will be his grave."

His rage surprised him. He had never thought himself a killer, but blood already stained his hands and soul.

So let me be a killer, he thought. *Let this blood consume me. I should have ended this a year ago. I could have ended this. I will stick this sword into Ferius's gut and we can go home.*

They ran along the street. Buildings of opaque glass bricks rose alongside, their awnings stretching above like a roof. Stalls, wagons, and barrels lay abandoned across the street. Tin plates still held the wares of merchants. This had been a market, but the Elorians had abandoned the place. Torin only glimpsed eyes peering from windows.

"Ferius!" he shouted. "Ferius, where do you cower?"

The sound of Ferius cackling faded. *Damn it!* Torin was running the wrong way. He turned back, panting, and raced into an alleyway, trying to follow the sound. Scattered scarves, live crabs that had fled from a toppled basket, and lost coins spread around his feet. Lanterns swung above upon wires, their faces mocking him.

"Ferius!"

Torin looked over his shoulder. Cam and Hem had fallen behind, wheezing. Bailey still ran with him, whipping her head from side to side.

"Torin, I don't like this," she said. "We're alone in a dark alley in a foreign city. Elorians hide inside these homes; some might be armed." She hefted her shield. "Where is that damn Ferius?"

They kept running. They raced down a cobbled alleyway, the buildings so grimy Torin could barely see the bricks' original color. A mile or two away, upon the city hilltop, Pahmey's crystal towers glittered, things of beauty and wealth. Here, still near the

city walls, spread a labyrinth of dirt and twisting corridors of glass, stone, and leather. The sounds of battle still rose somewhere in this hive; Torin heard Ferius chanting his prayers, blessing the sunlight for slaying the demons of the night.

"Bailey, we have to split up." Torin pointed down a street lined with bronze statues of leaping fish. "Head that way. Take the boys. Find Ferius and stop him." He turned toward another street, this one dark and twisting, awnings forming a roof above it. "I'll seek him there."

Bailey seemed ready to object but then clasped his arm. She nodded, blinked her eyes, and kissed his cheek.

"Boys!" she shouted, spinning toward Cam and Hem who were tottering up the road, breathing raggedly. "Come, follow. Let's find that bastard."

Torin watched them run down the street between the bronze fish, then turned and ran the other way. He clenched his jaw as he raced, one hand holding his shield, the other his sword.

"Stay safe, friends," he whispered.

The sound of Ferius's chanting rose ahead. Torin knew he was heading the right way. He knew he had sent his friends to safety.

I cannot endanger you, my friends. This is a battle I must fight alone. This is between Ferius and me.

He raced around a building of indigo bricks, emerged into a small cobbled square, and saw his foe.

Torin froze.

Bodies littered the square. Several were Elorian children, their heads crushed, their small limbs splayed out. Among them lay dead monks of Sailith, their robes soaking their blood. Fallen torches lay strewn, guttering and casting dancing shadows. A corral of wingless blue birds—each as tall as a horse—stood across the square, clattering and snapping their silvery beaks.

One Elorian still lived—the young woman with the scarred face. She lay on the ground, propped up on one elbow, bleeding from multiple wounds. Her eyes were closed and she mumbled silent prayers.

His mace raised, Ferius stood above her.

"You look like her," the monk said and spat. "Like the whore."

Torin, who was about to burst into the square, froze in the alleyway. He stared, silent, listening. Looked like who?

"Yes," Ferius continued, his back to Torin, disgust twisting his voice. "You can't even understand my words, can you? But I know who you are. I have seen you lurking in your village. You have her eyes. The eyes of my harlot mother."

Torin lost his breath. His heart skipped a beat. His brow furrowed in disbelief.

Ferius snorted. "It's a sad thing, is it not? I will not speak of this to my people. But here I speak to a dying wretch; I will feed this secret into your ears, then crush your skull, drowning the truth in your blood. Yes, we share a mother, savage. But not a father. My father was a traitor. A child of sunlight who slunk into the shadows, courting our mother, paying with gold and jewels to enter her bed." Ferius shook and his voice twisted with rage. "I killed my father for that sin. And I will kill you, my half-sister. My blood is dirty, but I will purify the world of your filth. I will kill every one of you savages for what you've done."

Torin could not help himself. The words fled his lips. "You're half-Elorian."

The monk froze. He spun around, tears on his cheeks.

Their eyes met across the street.

Ferius sucked in his breath, and slowly a grin spread across his face, revealing his small teeth.

"Torin the Gardener," he said. "And so . . . you've heard my little secret. And so . . . you've chosen to die." Ferius took a step

away from the wounded girl toward him. "I've been waiting for this moment for long years."

Torin looked down at the wounded girl, Ferius's half-sister. Her eyes had opened, and she stared at him. Her lavender eyes were twice the size of his. Recognition filled them—she remembered him!—then rage . . . and finally shock.

"I'm here to help you," he said to her, not knowing if she understood. He looked back up at Ferius and pointed his sword at the monk. "Your poison has caused enough death, Ferius. Your words have sunken fleets, smashed a city, and slaughtered children here upon this very street. And why? Because your blood is mixed? Because you're ashamed of your dark half? It ends here. I will end it."

Ferius laughed. "And so the gardener who fashioned himself a soldier is revealed as a traitor. Your punishment shall be death. I will deal it myself. Come to die."

He stepped away from the girl, moving toward Torin. Lips tight, Torin stepped over corpses toward the monk.

With a banshee cry, Ferius leaped forward. His robes fluttered. His mace came swinging down.

Torin stepped aside. The mace missed him by an inch. Torin thrust his sword, but Ferius was too fast. The monk swung his mace again, parrying the blade. Torin jumped back and attacked again. The two weapons clashed.

They fought between corpses and scattered fires. They fought with fury, weapons lashing in the darkness, steel clanging, eyes narrowed and jaws clenched. They fought the duel they should have fought a year ago—a fight for the wounded woman, a fight for Eloria, and a fight for home . . . for a village burned and twisted into hatred. It was the battle of Torin's life.

I fight for you, Father, he thought as he thrust his sword, keeping the mace at bay. *I fight with the courage you gave me.*

The tall, blue birds screeched in their pen, wingless and unable to flee. The mace swung, and Torin scampered backward. His heels nearly hit the wounded woman. She lay on the ground, bleeding and moaning, too hurt to rise. Torin did not even know her name, but he sensed the goodness in her; he was linked to this woman, and he could not fail here, he could not let her die.

Ferius kept moving forward, step by step. His mace kept swinging, faster and faster. Torin checked what blows he could, but had to keep walking backward. Finally his back hit a wall. Ferius grinned and swung his weapon. Torin had nowhere to retreat. With a shout, he raised his sword to meet the mace.

The flanged head drove through his blade like an axe through a branch.

Torin's sword shattered.

Shards flew across the square. One drove into Torin's leg and he screamed.

Ferius hissed through a grin, spraying saliva. Torin thrust his hilt—it ended with a stub of steel. The monk pulled back, but not fast enough; the shattered stub lashed across his cheek. Blood spurted.

The grin left the monk's face. Ferius swung his mace again.

Torin screamed.

The monk was aiming for his head. When Torin leaped sideways, the mace's flanges drove into his shoulder. They punched through his armor and into his flesh.

Blinded by pain, Torin lashed the remains of his sword, hoping to scratch Ferius again. He saw only the driving mace. Pain exploded across his forearm. His armor bent. The flanges tore into his flesh, and Torin screamed again. He raised his arms above his head, protecting his face, and felt the mace drive into his side. His armor creaked and pain bloomed, a bolt of fire spreading through him.

He fell to his knees.

He looked up to see Ferius grinning down at him, holding his bloodied weapon.

"And now, Torin . . ." the monk said. "Now you die."

He raised the mace high.

A shadow rose behind him.

Dragging herself forward, panting and bloodied, the Elorian woman lashed her katana.

Ferius screamed and fell to his knees. The Elorian blade emerged from his thigh, slick with blood. Still crawling, the young woman pulled the sword free. Trembling, her one arm hanging at an odd angle, the woman rose to her feet. As Ferius wailed on his knees, clutching his wound, the Elorian stood on trembling legs and raised her sword.

With a cry like a dying boar, Ferius swung his mace toward her.

The weapon slammed into the woman's chest.

Torin grimaced to hear ribs crack, a sound like snapping twigs.

The woman stood for an instant longer, looking down, seeming almost confused. Her katana clattered to the ground. She followed a heartbeat later.

Torin roared with rage.

"You killed her!" He leaped forward. "Ferius, you bastard, you killed her!"

He thrust his shattered sword. Only two inches of steel remained upon the hilt, but he drove both into Ferius's back.

The monk screamed. He spun around, trying to block another attack. Torin drove the hilt forward again, slicing Ferius's hand. Blood sprayed and Ferius dropped his mace.

Terror filled the monk's eyes.

Yellow robes stained red, he jumped over the Elorian woman and began to run. His blood trailed behind.

Torin's wounds blazed and bled. He wanted to fall down, curl up, and die. But he forced himself onward. He raced across the square, boots slipping in blood, chasing Ferius.

I can't let him get away. If he escapes now, he'll be back with more monks. He'll kill me and everyone in this city.

"Ferius, come face me, coward!" he shouted, yet the monk still ran, blood dripping.

As he passed by the corral of towering birds, Ferius yanked at the gate. The monk leaped into the corral, whipping the birds into a frenzy. They shrieked, clacked their beaks at the sky, and stamped their feet. Ferius ran between them, kicking the animals.

With shrieks, the birds emerged from their corral and stampeded across the square . . . toward Torin.

"Ferius!"

Torin kept running and the birds slammed into him. Twenty or more ran around him, each taller and heavier than him. Their talons clattered against the cobblestones and the littered corpses. Their voices bugled in fright and their eyes spun madly. Their feathery flanks thudded against Torin. He could see nothing but their feathers and terrified faces.

Torin fell. A talon pressed against his side, and he cried out in pain. When finally the stampede had passed him, disappearing into the distance, Ferius—monk of sunlight, slayer of innocents, half-Elorian—was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY
THE DUSKMOTH

Coughing and wheezing, Torin pushed himself onto his elbows, then rose to his feet. Blood, death, and feathers covered the small square. He began to stumble down the street, wanting to keep seeking Ferius, but a moan rose behind him. He spun around and his eyes dampened.

"You're still alive," he whispered.

The woman lay on her back, eyes half open, mouth working silently. Blood soaked her silken dress. She still held her sword.

Torin raced toward her and knelt. He touched her cheek and she met his gaze.

"I'm going to help you," he said. His wounds blazed, but the sadness for this woman, for this city, for all the lands of night eclipsed his pain. "I'm going to get you to safety."

Delicately, worried he would aggravate her wounds, he placed his arms around her. She looked up at him. A scar tugged the corner of her mouth, twisting her lips, but she managed a soft smile.

That smile shot relief, beauty, and joy through Torin with more vigor than pain or sadness could ever muster. She perhaps shared a mother with Ferius, but she felt fully good, her soul shining pure through her eyes. Torin's heart beat faster and he struggled to his feet, holding the woman in his arms. She felt no heavier than a doll.

"*Sen sen*," she said softly. "*Sen sen*, Torin."

He laughed softly and tears stung his eyes.

"You heard my name? Yes, I'm Torin. What's your name?"

Though she did not speak his tongue, she smiled up at him, held in his arms, her own eyes damp.

"Koyee," she said, pointing at herself.

He took several steps, holding her. "Koy, where can I—"

"Koy*ee*." She smiled weakly. "Ko-*yee*."

He corrected himself. "Koy*ee*. Where can I find a healer? Do you understand? Healer?"

He didn't know if she understood his words, but her hand rose. Shakily, she pointed down the street.

She wants me to take her there.

Torin walked, carrying her in his arms. They left the square and moved down a network of alleyways. She kept guiding him through the labyrinth. At every alley's mouth, Torin saw cobbled boulevards where troops marched, waving the raven banners and chanting for victory. Koyee led him along twisting, shadowy corridors, some barely three feet wide. They moved through the dregs, heading uphill toward the crystal towers.

With every step, Koyee felt lighter in his arms, and her eyes narrowed further. She lay limp, her breathing soft, growing softer as her blood trickled.

"I will heal you," Torin swore as he walked, limping now, their blood mingling. "I swear to you, Koyee, I will not let you die. I will not." His eyes stung and he gritted his teeth. "I came here into the night for you. I came here because I couldn't forget your eyes, not from the first time I saw you. I won't let you die."

She opened those lavender eyes, gazed at him, and smiled as if she understood. Her eyes closed. Her head tilted back. He shook her in his arms.

"Stay awake, Koyee! Don't fall asleep. Look at me!" He jostled her; she was so frail. His voice was choked. "You have to show me where to go."

She blinked at him. She could not even raise her finger to point, only gestured with her eyes. He kept walking.

They walked for what seemed like miles through the labyrinth of glass and stone, climbing the hill, until buildings grew

taller, their facades columned, their windows wide. The towers rose ahead, brighter than the moon. Green, blue, and white, they pierced the night sky. The tallest among them—it must have risen a thousand feet tall—ended with a glass dome. Boulevards stretched here, each full of marching Timandrians, but Koyee kept them to the side streets where no troops moved.

She took him to a small building of black stone. They walked down the alley and approached the back door.

"Is this your home, Koyee?" he asked.

She blinked at him weakly and her lips moved, struggling to form words.

"Home," she whispered, speaking in his tongue, her accent heavy.

When he pulled the door open, green smoke spilled out. He stepped inside to find a chamber full of lamps, beds, and hookahs of gurgling purple liquid. Several young women huddled in the corner, clad in silks and jewels, peering out a window and whispering. At the sound of Torin entering, they spun toward him. Their eyes widened.

"She needs help!" Torin said, holding Koyee in his arms. "She needs healing."

The women ran toward him, eyes teary, chattering in their tongue. They led Torin upstairs, and he entered a bedchamber and laid Koyee upon a bed. She smiled up at him, and he stroked her hair.

"You're home, Koyee," he said.

She touched his hand. "Home, Torin."

Her eyes closed and she slept.

As Timandrian troops marched outside the window, boots thudding and horns blaring, Torin stood in the corner, arms crossed. He watched as the women bathed Koyee with sponges and bandaged her wounds. A man rushed into the chamber, clad in green silks, his mustache dyed blue and purple. He shouted at

the women, then saw Koyee and paled. He waved everyone aside, leaned over Koyee, and examined her bent arm. When he set the bone, Koyee cried out and Torin winced. His eyes stung.

You're home, Koyee, he thought, watching the Elorians fuss over her. *But where is my home now?*

When Koyee drifted back into sleep, the mustached man pointed at Torin and shouted something. He stepped forward and tried to grab Torin, to drag him outside, but the young women stopped him. They shouted back at the man, forced him into a chair, and gestured at Torin. He imagined they were saying that he'd saved Koyee, that he was a friend. Torin wished he could understand their tongue. He longed to speak with them, to explain that he would help. He felt mute and helpless.

He tried to take a step closer to the bed, to lean over Koyee as she slept, to whisper something comforting, to touch her cheek or stroke her hair . . . but the mustached man glared and pointed and shouted. Torin left the room. His throat still felt tight, his wounds ached, and his fingernails dug into his palms.

"I never wanted any of this to happen," he said to the hallway's shadows. "I never wanted you hurt, Koyee. I never wanted this city to fall. I never wanted to enter the night, but I had to find you."

A ladder rose ahead, leading to a trapdoor. Torin climbed and emerged onto a tiled roof. He walked to the edge and stared upon Pahmey.

Across the hillsides below, the Timandrian army filled every street, their torches forming lines of fire. Outside the shattered walls, ships lay smashed upon the riverbank, some still burning. When Torin turned his head, he saw troops marching toward the towers, howling for Timandra. High upon domes, steeples, and battlements, soldiers hoisted the sunburst banners.

"Timandra!" they chanted. "Timandra! The sun is victorious!"

A temple of crystal columns rose only a few streets away, its walls engraved with moonstars. Upon its dome rose a golden statue of a bearded philosopher, his hands pressed together in prayer, his head lowered. As Torin watched, Sailith monks—tiny figures by the great idol—chanted for victory. They sang as they tugged chains, and the statue teetered, then crashed down onto the street. The monks cheered.

The wind ruffled Torin's hair. His cloak billowed like the sail of a sinking ship. He gazed upon this celebration, this victory for his people, and felt cold and alone. Ice filled his stomach with the chill of guilt.

"I entered the dusk and fought a man," he said into the wind. "I rode in a cavalry as a village burned. I sailed upon the river to sink a fleet, and I marched with soldiers into a shattered city. I killed a man. I served those who killed thousands."

He raised his head, eyes stinging, and gazed up at the crystal towers.

"But I saved one woman." His voice was but a whisper, drowning in the wind. "I don't know what gods listen in the night. I don't know what wisdom or justice can hear my words. But if there can be any redemption for my soul, let it be her." He closed his eyes. "The monks will seek you, Koyee of Eloria. Ferius will not forget the wound you gave him. But I promise this to you. If all the night burns, and all the darkness is lit with fire, I swear this, Koyee: I will save you."

Because, he thought, *it is the only thing that can still save my soul.*

Ahead upon the hilltop, Timandrians had climbed the great silver tower. The Sailith banner unfurled from its dome, a thousand feet above the city, a sigil of victory. The wind grew stronger, nearly tearing off Torin's cloak, scented of blood and fire. Standing on the roof, he clenched his fists and lowered his head.

* * * * *

She lay abed, staring at the shadowy ceiling, and thought of home.

She had left Oshy only half a year ago, but it felt like a different lifetime. Many times during her childhood, Koyee would lie like this on her back, staring into the shadows, and imagine. She would daydream of sailing to distant lands, of fighting monsters, of being more than a fisherman's daughter. In her dreams, she had always been a heroine and adventurer, a woman who never cooked crayfish but saved kingdoms.

"And who am I now?" she whispered.

Bandages covered her. Splints held her broken arm. Her body ached and fear filled her belly, but her soul flew like the moths she would see in the dusk, torn in two, half of darkness and half of light.

She looked out the window and saw the distant towers, green and blue and white against the night sky. Pahmey. For so long Koyee had wished to leave this city, to return to Oshy, to her home. For so long she had hated this place, and she had feared all who lived here.

Her eyes stung to remember how Little Maniko had saved her life, how the Dust Face Ghosts had fought with her, how the yezyani had healed her. Two of those yezyani—the beautiful Lilika and the impish Atana—sat sleeping in chairs at her bedside. They had not left her since she'd returned, and Koyee tasted a tear on her lips.

"This is our home now, Eelani," she said to her friend, feeling the spirit's warmth against her chest. "And these are the people that I love."

Her invisible friend cuddled close to her, and Koyee imagined that she could feel the spirit's breath against her neck. She often wondered whether Eelani was real or simply another daydream, another comfort she had imagined in the darkness and

loneliness. She still did not know. But here in the shadows, she thought that it no longer mattered.

"Because I'm no longer alone," she whispered. "Because I've lived through poverty and through war, and I found a place to belong, and I found something to fight for. Because I'm no longer Koyee Mai, a frightened orphan. I am my dreams under the moon." She swallowed a lump and looked at those towers outside her window. "Though evil burns outside, and though I am afraid, I found a new home. Father, I hope I made you proud."

The door creaked open. The yezyani stirred in their chairs but did not wake. He stood there in the doorway, a mere shadow, daring not enter, but in his mismatched eyes she saw his compassion. For so long those eyes had haunted her—the eyes that had stared over her father's bones. For so long those had been demon eyes. Now she saw the eyes of a friend . . . of Torin.

She looked at him, and he stared back, and he did not speak, but she knew his thoughts.

I'm here. I will not leave you.

"You are day and I am night," she said to him, and a smile found her lips. "You are a white wing and I am black. Together we will fly."

A flutter caught her eye, and she looked up and gasped. Fresh tears filled her eyes, her smile trembled, and Koyee laughed because she knew that though her city crumbled, there was still hope and goodness in the world. She reached up and the moth landed on her fingertips, a duskmoth shaped like the world, its wings of sunlight and darkness. It moved its feathery antennae, tilted its head, and then flew out the window into the endless night.

The story continues in . . .

EMPIRES OF MOTH

The Moth Saga, Book Two

NOVELS BY DANIEL ARENSON

***Dawn of Dragons*:**
Requiem's Song
Requiem's Hope
Requiem's Prayer

***Song of Dragons*:**
Blood of Requiem
Tears of Requiem
Light of Requiem

***Dragonlore*:**
A Dawn of Dragonfire
A Day of Dragon Blood
A Night of Dragon Wings

***The Dragon War*:**
A Legacy of Light
A Birthright of Blood
A Memory of Fire

***Requiem for Dragons*:**
Dragons Lost
Dragons Reborn
Dragons Rising

The Moth Saga

Moth

Empires of Moth

Secrets of Moth

Daughter of Moth

Shadows of Moth

Legacy of Moth

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KEEP IN TOUCH

www.DanielArenson.com
Daniel@DanielArenson.com
Facebook.com/DanielArenson
Twitter.com/DanielArenson